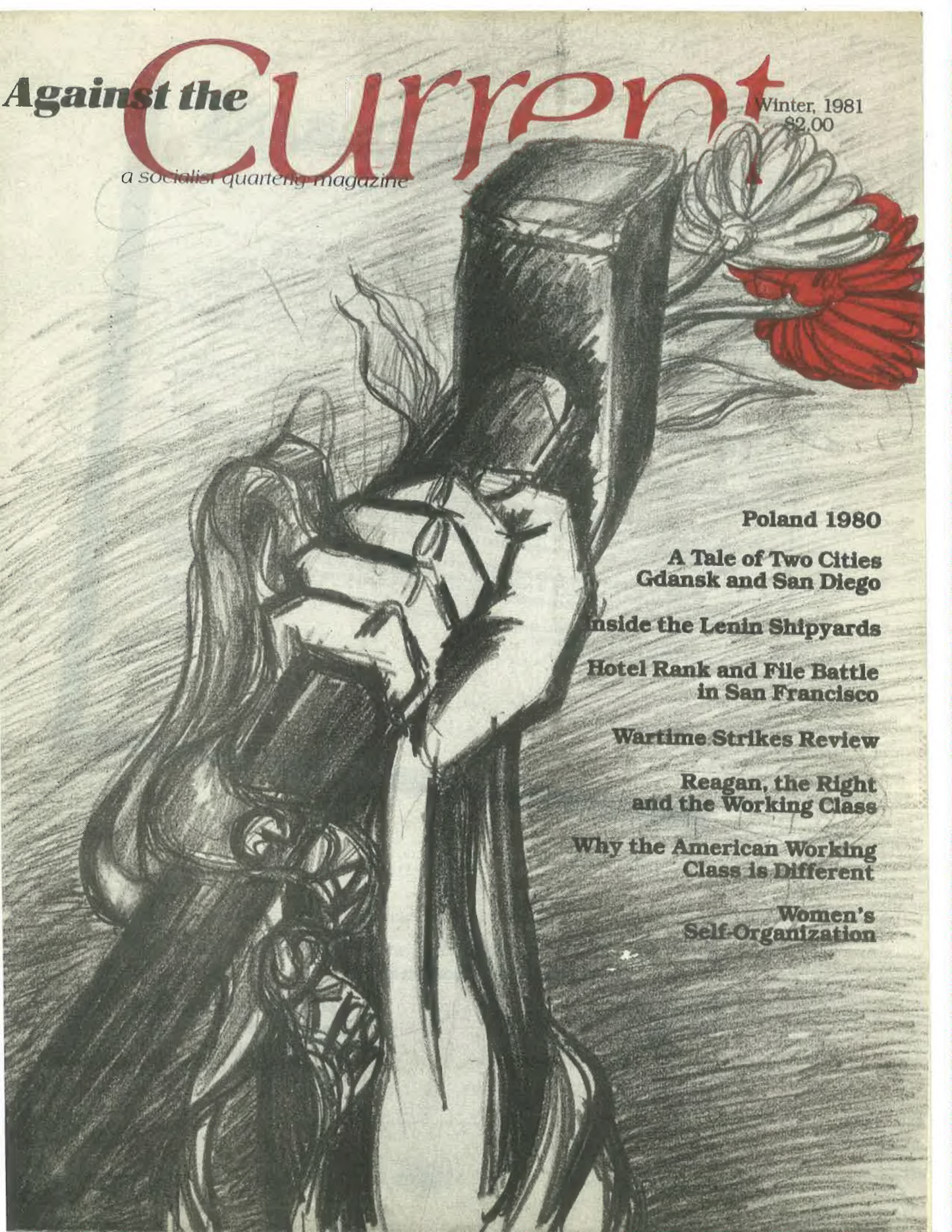


# **Against the** *Current*

a socialist quarterly magazine

Winter, 1981  
\$2.00



**Poland 1980**

**A Tale of Two Cities  
Gdansk and San Diego**

**Inside the Lenin Shipyards**

**Hotel Rank and File Battle  
in San Francisco**

**Wartime Strikes Review**

**Reagan, the Right  
and the Working Class**

**Why the American Working  
Class is Different**

**Women's  
Self-Organization**



# CITY LIFE · VIDA URBANA

(617) 524-3541

Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts 02130

670 Centre Street

Dear Workers Power

Congratulations on the publication of *Against the Current* and thanks for sticking your organizational neck out and taking leadership in the movement for regroupment of revolutionary forces in the U.S. City Life believes it is just one of many organizations whose practice reflects your four points of unity and we are excited at the possibility of linking up and building the communication necessary to figure out our common strategy for working class revolution in the U.S. Speaking for our element of the potentially "regrouped" forces, we're a feisty and independent bunch, having held out long and hard against "vanguardism" and taking the democratic part of democratic centralism very seriously. You've got your work cut out for you. Good luck!

The analysis and criticisms of struggles that Workers Power has been directly involved in (NY transit workers and TDU) are the strongest parts of the magazine. We would like to see more of this from you and from other groups.

Our experience in community organizing leads us to many of the same conclusions about social democracy. We know that you are looking to groups that have community practice to provide more balance and we look forward to expanding this analysis in that direction.

Our thinking on black nationalism has developed in some of the same directions as that in Joel Jordan's article. We hope to see more articles on the role of white-skin privilege, and we hope to contribute an article on our view, which may be different, of the significance for our revolution of black liberation and national liberation struggles.

Several of us found the magazine difficult to read. While we understand that the magazine is directed to the left, we think it is possible to develop a style that is not over-simplified but is also more comfortable for working class socialists who aren't used to reading theoretical material.

We appreciate being asked to be editorial associates. We can't do it at this time but we look forward to the time when we can.

In struggle, City Life

In this issue of *Against the Current*, we are pleased to welcome nine new Associate Editors.

Daniel Anker  
Carl Boggs  
Frank Broadhead  
Tom Condit  
Mike Merrill

Gary Ruchwarger  
David Unger  
Howard Wallace  
Myra Tanner Weiss

# **Against the** Current

a socialist quarterly magazine sponsored by Workers Power

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<b>Editors</b> Robert Brenner Steve Zeluck
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*Gdansk strikers at the Lenin shipyard gates.*

*by The Editors*

**T**he strikes in Poland have been an inspiration to workers and the Left throughout the world. In a period clouded over by reaction and political disorientation on the Left, the strikes provide a powerful antidote to the pervasive cynicism about the possibility of working class socialist revolution. Hopefully, American workers will learn to "speak Polish." Meanwhile, the strikes provide a vital benchmark against which every political current must check its premises. What can we discover, or rediscover in the Polish events?

### **POWER, PROGRESS, AND THE WORKING CLASS**

The strikes in Poland constitute a dramatic reaffirmation of the Marxist view that the working class in motion remains the key to progressive social change in our epoch. The movement of the working class in Poland to bring the government to its knees parallels that of the French workers in May 1968 and of the British miners who brought down the Heath government in 1974. The Polish strug-

gles have dramatically placed back on the agenda the only alternative to world-wide plans to make the working class pay for deepening economic crisis. That alternative is economic and cultural progress through a planned economy, which is democratically controlled by the working class through its own institutions.

### **Rosa Luxemburg and the Mass Strike**

The Polish strikes have once again confirmed the seminal insights of the Polish revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg. For her, the working class, through its own mass, self-activity transforms its understanding of society and creates the instruments for revolutionizing it. Through the mass strike, the workers develop their own mass organizations and build their power. As a result, "fighting city hall" begins to appear possible because it is in fact suddenly realistic. Suppressed dreams now appear capable of realization. The workers begin to move from economic demands to political demands, and then back again. In the process, they deepen their understanding of the tasks before them.



So it has been in Poland. The series of mass strike upsurges of 1970-1, 1976, and 1980 have constituted a powerful learning process for the Polish workers. In the course of their struggles they have deepened their analyses and sharpened some of their weapons, *if not yet all those they need.*

To start with, the Polish workers have largely shed the illusion that they can reform Polish society by changing the faces of the leadership, through relying on one or another wing of the bureaucracy. In the uprising of 1956, they placed their hopes in a reformer, the "national communist" Wladislaw Gomulka. After the 1970 strikes, they accepted the "worker," Edward Gierek, but with grave reservations. Today, virtually no one thinks that Stanislaw Kania, the latest self-styled reformer, will make any difference.

The Polish workers have, moreover, perfected their methods of struggle. They have used the sit-in, instead of violently attacking Communist Party headquarters as they had done in previous risings. For they knew they had to avoid giving the government a pretext for repression. Above all, of course, they rediscovered the strength of a unified trade union movement, independent of the state. Through this powerful instrument, they have extracted huge economic and political gains, and have begun to transform the social order.

Finally, the Polish workers have recognized their common interests and need for collaboration with the revolutionary intellectuals. By working with that quasi-party formation, the KOR (Workers Self-Defense Organization), they have vastly improved their ability to spread their ideas and provide a focus for organization—especially through the newspaper *Rabotnik* (Worker).

The results of all these advances have been dramatic. In the summer strikes, the workers won higher wages and better conditions, of course. But more important, they won political victories such as the extension of free speech, the freeing of political prisoners, the pledge to reduce the privileges of party functionaries, the introduction of rationing, and of course the right to their own unions.

The workers' progress has not been uniform. The increased influence of the church (to which we shall return below), may represent a certain regression in the midst of a general advance. Nevertheless, in unleashing a movement of enormous power—manifested above all in their remarkable trade union organization Solidarity—the Polish workers have at least positioned themselves to begin to confront and to work through the enormous problems which face them.

### **From Workers Councils to Workers Power?**

Given that industry is nationalized in Poland, it is quite impossible for the new unions to engage in economic bargaining without posing alternative policies for the direction of the economy as a whole. When they ask for more meat, or for a five day work week, or for improved wages for the most poorly-paid workers, they cannot avoid raising the question of the plan for the economy, how is it to be elaborated and implemented. Implicitly or explicitly, this raises the question of who is to rule in Poland.

In Russia in 1917, in Germany in 1918-19, in Spain in 1936, workers built soviets or workers councils to take their revolutions forward. What distinguishes the soviets, above all, is that they are built directly out of the workers struggles—at the workplace, in the neighborhoods, and in the army. As the creation of workers mobilized against the employer and the state, they are characterized by the full-

est and most direct participation, the most extreme democracy. As institutions through which the workers govern themselves, the councils or soviets are "designed" both for the establishment of workers rule and the maintenance of that rule—as instruments through which workers reach for power and establish their own hegemony. In the councils, we find the indispensable foundation for a workers' revolution.

In Poland, the assemblies of representatives, drawn from the factory and office strike committees and assembled at the Gdansk shipyards, became embryonic councils—soviets. Their strategies were the outcome of the most democratic deliberations possible. The mass of workers insisted on being directly present at the negotiations of their delegates by having the proceedings broadcast throughout the shipyards. And at every stage, the workers vigorously insisted on their own final control, repeatedly rebuffing even their leader Lech Walesa in the process. Indeed, so "out of control" was the workers' conduct in Poland that Doug Fraser, president of the UAW, was moved to "sympathize with the plight of the Polish authorities" for having to negotiate under such "impossible" conditions.

The actions and ideas of the Polish workers, in their factory committees and their union, have, intentionally or not, gone far toward creating a situation of dual power in Poland. Authority no longer resides exclusively in the state. What remains to be seen is how far the workers can or will go at this time to resolve the situation.

## **THE ROOTS OF THE CRISIS IN POLAND**

### **Who Are the Real "Anti-Socialist Elements?"**

Ironically, the ruling authorities in the capitalist countries, as well as in Eastern Europe, have recognized the revolutionary potential of the strikes in Poland more clearly than have some groupings on the left. Some on the left have seen in the Polish workers' movement the spectre of the restoration of capitalism. To them, as to the Polish and the Russian Communist Parties, the workers are "objectively anti-socialist elements." If this were indeed the case, then it would be hard to account for the fact that the ruling classes in the West have rallied strongly to the aid of the Polish authorities.

The leaders of world capitalism have universally recognized that the striking workers have little to offer them. *They* understand that the entire *logic* of the strike movement is such as to impel the organization of the working class to fight for a say in the reshaping of Polish society in a democratic and socialist direction. *They understand that the workers cannot begin to win their fight against the "red bourgeoisie" and for the "return of the factories to us" without moving left.*

Thus, the verbal position adopted by Carter and Schmidt encouraging the Polish strikers is merely public posturing. By appearing to support the Polish workers, they can at once appear as the champions of workers democracy and at the same time discredit socialism among their own workers by linking it to the repressive regimes and policies in Poland and the Soviet Union. This undoubtedly helps prepare the ground for their own interventionist plans "against communism" around the world. Of course, the western governments would like nothing better than the restoration of capitalism in Poland. But they would never ride the tail of a workers' movement to that end. That option is far too dangerous to be thinkable. Instead, they have resigned themselves to penetrating the Polish economy by slower but far safer means—by increasing trade, investment, and loans.



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The real policy, in the United States and the West European states, therefore, has been to *support* the Polish regime. By 1980, the Western Banks had already lent \$20 billion to Poland. But they were holding back on granting further credits, for they had serious doubts that these could be repaid, especially once the strikes had broken out. Nevertheless, at the height of the crisis in late August, Washington and Bonn insisted that the reluctant banks *expand* their loans to Poland in order to help shore up the tottering regime. For Carter and Schmidt, the stabilization of the Polish regime and the curbing of the explosive workers' movement were clearly of the highest priority. Social Democratic chancellor Schmidt doubtless understands the possible effect of the Polish strikes on the receptivity of workers throughout Europe, both East and West, to renewed radicalization. In a period of deepening economic crisis, they can ill-afford the heightening of class struggle. On the contrary, they seek a dramatic expansion of trade and investment to the east, and this above all requires stability.

That same preference for the Polish regime and against the workers movement has obviously been the source of the Polish church hierarchy's warnings against the workers "anarchy" and its calls for stability. The church has no love for the Polish state. But for it, too, anything is preferable to a successful workers movement. They, too, understand that as the workers struggle increases in scope and power, it will move for more socialism, not less. Equally important, they understand that a powerful workers movement could displace the church as "the alternative" to the regime.

But if the workers' strikes are not the source of the crisis in Poland, then what is? Who *are* the real "anti-socialist elements," and what is the real source of the crisis?

### Origin of the Bureaucracy

The series of explosions of working class discontent, ever deepening in their political aspirations, are the result, not the cause of the crisis in Poland. They arose in particular from the stagnation and deepening economic crisis which have gripped the system of production in Poland. That crisis reflects, in turn, the conflict at the heart of the system between the working class and the ruling bureaucracy.

The Polish bureaucracy, like almost every other ruling group in Eastern Europe, was imposed by Russian military power after World War II. The Polish socialist movement had been largely decimated in the interwar years, first by the fascist Pilsudski, and then by Stalin. In the late 1930s, the Polish Party leadership was ordered to Moscow and most of it was executed. As a result, the CP could only play a small role in the anti-fascist resistance which was led by nationalist and anti-communist forces. This undermined the credibility of socialism. As a result, the regime which was installed by Moscow has had a particularly weak hold on the populace. The Polish CP grew therefore in the post-war years largely through the recruitment of hundreds of thousands who were offered special positions and privileges. The party's profound separation from the masses was only increased by Stalin's new purges of the party in the late 1940s.

### From Alienation to Crisis

It is the alienation of the working class from the system of production controlled by the bureaucracy, which is at the root of the problems of the Polish economy, and the source, in turn, of the repeated working class rebellion. For although private capitalist property relations do not prevail in Polish industry, the bureaucratic system can realize none of the advantages of socialism.

Socialism promises two main historic advances over capitalism: (1) it will unleash the creativity of the working majority; (2) by installing workers' democratic control over society, it will allow for rational planning of the economy. Far from being able to do either of these things, the bureaucratically-run economic system in Poland has suffered the most extreme disruption precisely because of its inability to win the commitment of the working class and because of its inability to plan.

### Productivity Versus the Workers

Under capitalism, the creative powers of the vast majority of people are suppressed. The mass of working people are alienated from the economy and society. They have no control over their own labor, no rights over their product, and, above all, no say in how *production as a whole* is to be organized. How much of what is to be produced for what purpose? Consequently, they have no interest in improving it. That is why the capitalist class, in order to develop production, has had to rely on methods which tend to cut down their dependence upon the creative powers and skills of the workers they exploit. They improve production largely by introducing machinery. This is, to an important degree, because machinery reduces the need to depend on workers' skill, initiative, intelligence, or caring.

In contrast, socialism promises an explosive development of productive power because it can, *and must*, involve workers in democratic control over production—at the level of the work place and at the level of the economy as a whole. Only when working people can make *sure* that production is carried on in *their* interests, will they be fully motivated to develop and apply their mental powers. The possibility then arises of a new *kind* of industrial revolution: in the interest of human needs, not capital, and based on genuinely free, creative labor.

It must be emphasized that increasing labor productivity under socialism is essential. It is indispensable in order to bring about a dramatic shortening of the working day. This is the ultimate requirement for the realization of the promise of a socialist society. For only if people can reduce the time devoted to producing what they need to live will they have the time to devote to running the society themselves—and to develop their capacities so as to overcome the age-old domination of mental over manual labor.

It is a definitive sign of the absence of socialism in Poland that the economic system can not win the support of the workers in developing production. So long as production is governed by a bureaucracy for ends determined by the bureaucracy, productivity of labor cannot be radically increased, even with the introduction of new machinery. Without control by the actual producers, the economies of Eastern Europe will continue to suffer *disastrously* from shoddy work, sabotage, absenteeism and massive waste.

Indeed, the bureaucracy as a ruling group in Eastern Europe is, in certain respects, worse off than its counterparts in the capitalist countries in trying to get improved performance from the working class. In particular, they have greater difficulty disciplining workers through the threat of firing them. This is because capitalists can and do use unemployment as a club to compel workers to produce. That option has not, so far, been available to the bureaucracy.

### Democracy and Planning

Of course, the ability to unleash the creativity of the working class can only be realized through the organization of production as a whole on the basis of a rational



plan. Planning is socialism's answer to the waste of human and material resources built into capitalism's anarchy of production and, of course, to that most extreme form of waste, the capitalist crisis. But effective rational planning requires democracy in the production process as a whole, because planning cannot work in a top down fashion. For a plan to function, there must be the closest collaboration between the central planners and the direct producers, and, in particular, there must be constant, voluntary, honest feed-back from the base to the center. Each individual enterprise must produce accurate information to the central planner on what and how much is being produced, on what manpower and raw materials are needed and, in particular, what *changes* in production are taking place to improve output. Each enterprise must also, so far as possible, try to economize on the use of inputs of labor, machinery, and raw materials to fulfill its part in national production. But it is only under socialism that any of this can be expected. For it is only under socialism that the workers see it in their interest to make sure the plan can work, by providing the information that only they can give, and by doing what they can to improve the efficiency of their production.

In Poland, as well as the other East European regimes, this kind of rational planning is impossible, since the planning authorities at the center are unable to get the cooperation of the working class, or even of the managers of the individual units. Indeed, it is often in the workers' (and managers') individual interests to conceal what they are doing from the planning authorities. By systematically underestimating what they can produce and by hoarding labor and raw materials, they can make it easier for themselves to meet their quotas. The workers can appear to produce more and expend less energy, and the managers can get credit for higher output without having to push the workers to produce more. Because the workers can see little stake in developing production as a whole, their immediate and on-the-spot interest determines the workers' action. The result is that the central planners find it very difficult to coordinate production. A new, concealed form of chaos in production thus emerges.

Naturally, the bureaucracy tries to put the blame on the workers. When the workers demand more, they reply; "but look at how low production is; you must sacrifice." The workers' reply has been the same for twenty-five years. "Let us run production, and we will show you improvements you couldn't imagine. If sacrifice is necessary for our economy, then we will decide to make them."

It is this deep-rooted resistance of the Polish bureaucracy, or any bureaucracy, to the democratic core of socialism, which stamps the bureaucracy as the real "anti-socialist element."

### **The Bureaucratic Economy in the World Market**

Under these circumstances, the failure of the Polish economy to "produce" is hardly surprising. In the decade of the '60s, the overall rate of growth in the economy allowed only a slight increase in consumption. Real wages grew at less than 1% a year. When one adds to this failure the pressure created by the 1970 strike wave, it becomes easy to understand why the regime sought a new solution via a massive entry into the world market. Their new policy was to borrow vast sums (\$20 billion by 1980), to be paid off by increased exports. It was a "solution" which only compounded their problems.

The creation of a world market is undoubtedly one of the great contributions of capitalism to cheap, efficient

production. The world market allows different regions and nations to specialize. Each country produces what it can make best (i.e. at lowest cost) and buys from other countries what they can produce best. Thus, the U.S. buys cars and cameras from Japan, and Japan, in turn, buys aircraft and food from the U.S. The result is a vast overall increase in efficiency.

In contrast, to insist on self-sufficiency (autarky) is to court disaster, for it means extremely inefficient production. It means being unable to economize on labor and resources by doing the things one does best.

There are, therefore, vast pressures on the economies of Eastern Europe to participate in the world market. But the efforts of a planned economy to take advantage of the world market—*so long as it is a capitalist world market*—contain the seeds of another disaster. For it is quite impossible to plan an economy on a national scale, if that economy is deeply involved in the international capitalist, unplanned market.

The reasons are obvious. Since the supply and demand of goods on the world market are always fluctuating, there is no way to know in advance how much of your product will be needed, or how much of a product you need will be available (and at what price). How then can one begin to plan? More and more, you have to let your own economy operate on a market basis. To make matters worse, the world capitalist economy is not just subject to change, but to crises, to inflation and depression.

An isolated economy is therefore faced with an impossible choice: It can enter the world economy for greater efficiency, but is then unable to plan; or it can plan, but then it must forego the efficiency which can be gained on the world market.

Nowhere is this dilemma more evident and more devastating than in Poland. After 1970, the Polish authorities initiated their massive attempt to specialize for export. This required that they import machinery in order to increase productivity at home, so that they could export competitively. They could not have picked a worse time to attempt this solution. They entered the world economy just as it was going into crisis. That crisis in turn was projected into Poland. The market for Polish goods shrunk. At the same time, due to inflation, they had to pay more for western imports. It was a double squeeze on the Polish economy. It made a mockery of Poland's attempt to plan and it triggered the August strikes.

The conflict between the efficiency derived from the world market, and the need to plan the economy is, in the last analysis, resolvable in only two ways. On the one hand, the planned economy can simply subordinate its system of production to the market. This is the hope and strategy of world capitalism and its banks for Eastern Europe. The alternative, as the classic socialist thinkers maintained, is to consolidate workers' revolutions in at least several countries, including major advanced countries. On this basis, one can take advantage of an "international" division of labor, but this time on an internationally planned, socialist basis.

For Marxists, therefore, the interests of socialism—of economic development and a planned democratic economy—require a foreign policy strategy keyed to encouraging world revolution. This is a practical need, not an ideological or utopian goal, for a country which is caught in the dilemma between market and plan.

The Polish bureaucrats, like their Russian and Chinese counterparts reject this strategy. Even in a period of crisis



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for capitalism they are far from seeking to encourage and support international revolution as *part* of a strategy for resolving their economic difficulties. Instead, they have, to a large extent, thrown in their lot with the future of capitalism. It is capitalist *stability*, not crisis which they look to. They look upon capitalist crisis not as a source of revolutionary developments but as a threat to their access to the world market for capital and goods, and a threat to their relations with the U.S.

Of course, in the short run, on a *tactical* level, compromises of one kind or another are unavoidable. The post-1917 revolutionaries in Russia found themselves inviting foreign investors, compromising with domestic capitalists, and adopting conciliatory stances at times in international conflicts with capitalism. It was impossible not to be sympathetic in the face of the enormous problems faced by the revolutionaries of that day. But these early revolutionaries never surrendered the centrality of the strategy of international revolution as indispensable for socialism. They did not subordinate revolution to their narrow *national* goals. Note the enormous energies they put into the building of the early Third International.

But if these temporary *tactical* compromises become frozen into *strategies*—as they have been—then the dilemma becomes insuperable. That's the rub. The bureaucracies of Poland, USSR, China, do not and cannot have a strategy in which revolution plays a central role. And yet, such a strategy is indispensable. The prospects are therefore that those economies will sink deeper into the morass of economic encirclement by world capitalism.

Poland today is a case in point. Its strategy of going to the world market has piled crisis on top of crisis. The Polish debt to the West now totals \$21 billion. In 1980 the payments due to Western banks, interest plus principal, amounted to \$7.2 billion, a sum equal to 90% of Poland's total export earnings. It was the cuts in living standards—needed to pay the banks—which, in turn, triggered the August strikes.

### PROBLEMS OF THE POLISH REVOLUTION Independent Trade Unions?

Some leftists, especially some of the "party building" movement in the U.S., have expressed uneasiness over the demand by Polish workers for independent unions. Trade unions, they seem to be saying, are appropriate only to the economic struggle under capitalism. They are necessary, but they can be concerned only with economic benefits, with sectional, not class-wide interests. Ultimately, we are told, unions can only be carriers of pro-capitalist politics. In this view, it is the revolutionary party alone which is the source of revolutionary politics. Since there is no revolutionary party in Poland, it follows that the independent unions must end up being reactionary—in particular, subject to the leadership of the church and the nationalists. The only hope we are offered for a progressive solution is to give critical support to the Polish and Russian CPs against the unions. The goal is to "rectify" the line of the CPs. And this process of "rectification" is to occur apart from, and indeed *against* the working class movement in Poland.

Such a viewpoint is premised upon a mechanistic view of the development of consciousness. It sets up artificial barriers between the development of workers' activity

and their ideas, between the economic struggle and the political struggle, and between the trade union and party. Implicit is the idea that the working class cannot, by itself, through its own struggles and its own institutions develop revolutionary ideas. The working class, in this view, is capable "by its own efforts" of generating only "trade union consciousness." The working class creates unions for the defensive *economic* struggle against the employer, we are told, but this struggle is understood to be sharply separate from the struggle for socialism, and may be counterposed to it. Only the revolutionary party can represent the "working class as a whole" and the workers' political striving toward socialism. From this perspective the working class is viewed as essentially a blank slate. It does not develop its political ideas through acting on the world in pursuit of its material interests. Rather, it passively reflects the world. In particular, the workers' political ideologies are a reflection of the relative strengths of the different external forces acting upon it, each one attempting to impose its own ideology: on the one hand, pro-capitalist or reformist elements—on the other, the revolutionary party.

If these notions were true, the hope for socialist revolution in Poland, or anywhere else for that matter, would be dim indeed—an idealist dream. For in this case, we could not locate a drive for revolution in the material interest of the working class in motion around its needs. We would have to rely on enlightened elements *outside* the class, who are nonetheless capable of developing socialist politics and "injecting" them into the working class.

The charge that without a party, working class organizations can only achieve "trade union consciousness" (economism), bears examination. The view holds that working people understand their own self-interest only from the standpoint of their immediate local groups, their work group, local union, etc. It is the opposite, of understanding that the workers' self-interest and the interest of their local group is necessarily tied to the interests of the class as a whole. Typically, "economism" shows itself when stronger, better-organized sections of the working class try to defend their particular, narrow interests (skilled vs unskilled, employed vs unemployed, black vs white, male vs female, etc.), without taking into account the weaker sectors—when unionists try to defend themselves without regard for the less well-organized workers, let alone those in need of organization.

The tendency to economism is indeed powerful, and undeniable. Anyone can cite 100 examples of it. But however real it is, it is only one side of workers in struggle. It would be equally wrong to ignore the fact that fighting the employer can and has revealed a second side. For at times workers are compelled by struggle to build alliances with other sectors of the working class (and with oppressed groups). The class struggle can, and at times has, politicized the class and even directed it against the government. Given the state of the American working class in recent years it is hardly surprising that this tendency should be less apparent. But it is nonetheless a tendency which has been demonstrably, forcefully and repeatedly present in the history of the labor movement, and, as we shall show, in Poland itself.

It is precisely because of this *non-economist* side of working class movements that political parties (real workers parties, not sects) can arise at all. Neither the program nor the organization of a workers' party are spon-



taneously generated "from the outside." For the revolutionary organization is built out of workers struggle, and its ideas are corrected and confirmed in the course of struggle. Indeed, the revolutionary organization wins the right to call itself a workers' party only to the degree that its program corresponds to workers' struggles and contributes to the success of those struggles. A revolutionary group becomes a party only after it has been accepted by masses of workers fighting in their own institutions, unions, factory councils, etc. The idea that a party can "rectify" its line apart from developing and testing it inside the workers' own institutions is not true in general or in Poland in particular.

For if the revolutionary party can bring the workers' movement indispensable perspectives, (the result of important analytical work), the question remains, where do these ideas come from. In trying to answer this question we discover that just as the workers can and do learn from revolutionary socialist organizations, so do "scientific socialists" learn from the mass movements. The process is a two-way street.

Thus, Marx and Engels "discovered" the working class as the agent of human emancipation through their experience with the *political* Chartist movement of the English workers, as well as with French working class socialists. It was on the basis of the action of the masses of the Paris Commune that Marx came to reject his old idea that the capitalist state could be used by the workers as an instrument for the transition to socialism. Workers, as he saw, by the Commune's example, would have to smash the old state and set up an entirely new form, one through which they could more or less directly exert their control over society as a whole. Finally, it was only from the mass strikes and soviets of 1905 that the Russian revolutionaries began to understand the proper relation between the revolutionary party and the class it aims to represent. The Bolsheviks, it will be remembered, at first abstained from participating in the soviets in 1905, and demanded that the workers follow *their* leadership. The events of 1905 finally taught the revolutionaries that no party could establish a claim to leadership except by winning the support of the working class through the institutions that the working class itself throws up to express its interests—factory councils, unions, soviets. They "learned" too that a successful program for revolution can not be completed apart from the *forms* and events of the revolution itself.

The events in Poland substantially support this view of the relation between workers struggles and the development of politics and political groups. For the entire dynamic of the Polish movement has been towards overcoming economist tendencies within the working class and towards a heightened political awareness. This was accomplished by means of developing the struggle and through constructing institutions of workers power.

Thus, the Polish workers have moved to involve larger and larger sections of the working class in their movement and organizations and to run together economic and political demands. The strike movement and Solidarity originally were based in the shipyard workers of the North, who were best organized and best off materially. Naturally, the Polish government has pursued a policy of trying to undercut the movement by isolating the shipyard workers, by granting them special privileges. Nonetheless, from the first, Solidarity has insisted that the

weaker, less organized sections of the working class share equally in all of the benefits won by the shipyard workers' strike, even though this has made it harder for the government to grant the shipyard workers' own demands, and thus risked serious setbacks. In particular, when the government appeared to be withholding from hospital workers the concessions already granted to the shipyard workers in the summer strikes, Solidarity threatened a general strike and forced the government to give in. Clearly, the leaders of Solidarity are well-aware that the strength of the union depends on developing the broadest and deepest links among all layers of the working class.

The way the Gdansk strikers treated the meat crisis speaks volumes about the direction of the struggle and the growing understanding on the part of Solidarity. The Gdansk shipyard workers rejected an offer of more meat for themselves alone. On the contrary, they have put forward the demand for rationing as a temporary solution to the meat shortage. This has critical implications. Rationing would benefit the poorest workers the most. On the one hand, it would interfere with the tendency of the bureaucracy to see that its own supporters get more meat. Above all, it manifests Solidarity's underlying drive to take responsibility for the functioning of the economy as a whole. As already noted, the entire course of the struggle has witnessed the constant interpenetration of political and economic demands—a fight not just for higher wages and shorter hours, but for greater freedom of speech, the freeing of political prisoners, and above all, the demand for a greater say in the running of the economy as a whole. Is it not obvious that it is the *power* of Solidarity, its organization and discipline, which have allowed the Polish workers even to contemplate the take over of society in their own interests?

### A Revolutionary Party?

But to assert the creative potential of the working class, its capacity for the socialist reorganization of society, is not to deny the need for an organization of revolutionaries in Poland.

Some have argued that because the workers' struggle in Eastern Europe pits the workers directly against the state, every economic struggle is therefore political. They have therefore concluded that no revolutionary party is required, because the issues of power are presumably so clear. However, even under capitalism, the gap between the economic struggle and the political struggle is often quickly breached. In most militant strikes, the state is very quickly brought in against the workers in one way or another—through the interference of the courts, or the repressive force of the police. Moreover, it is in the logic of any developing struggle against the employers to raise the question of state power; for, sooner or later, the state's role as guarantor of private property and the whole system of exploitation is graphically revealed. The existence of nationalized property does *not* therefore provide a rationale of "no-party."

Actually, the need for a self-conscious, organized revolutionary organization in Poland, as in the West, comes also from other requirements beyond the need to "politicize" the struggle. The class struggle is hardly continuous. There are periods of great advance in which the workers, sensing their own power, are profoundly radicalized. But then the struggle recedes, and the goals which only a short time previously appeared realistic now seem



## Against the Current

dreams. A revolutionary organization enables those who are revolutionized in struggle to maintain their revolutionary activity and development even when mass activity recedes. In particular, a party is required to draw up the lessons of the past, analyze the present, increase the organization and understanding of workers, and above all, prepare to intervene in the next upsurge. In this respect, the special task of the revolutionary organization is always to reach out to the less experienced, less conscious workers, and to link the more conscious workers to them. The task is, above all, to forge links between the many competing interest groups among working people—between men and women, blacks and whites, manual and intellectual workers, etc. These are tasks which are no less critical in Poland than they are in the U.S.

### The K.O.R.

One of the features which distinguishes the current movement in Poland from the strike waves of 1956, '70, '76, is the near-universal abandonment of any illusion in any reform-wing of the CP. In the past, certainly in 1956, sections of the working class sought political leadership in sections of the Polish CP (Gomulka). But they have not done so in 1980. As a result, the door has been open to revolutionary forces independent of the CP.

Chief among these is the K.O.R. (Committee for Social Self-defense). Since '76, the K.O.R. has led an unparalleled, semi-legal existence, published a workers newspaper (RABOTNIK) in editions of 40,000 and helped to defend militants against government repression. The role of K.O.R. in the developing movement in Poland testifies to the potentially critical role of a party which develops the consciousness of the working class, especially by presenting a clear summing up of its history and experience, and setting out alternatives for taking the struggle forward. K.O.R. undoubtedly played a key roll in preparing the revolt, ideologically and organizationally. Indeed, it had helped spawn local, independent unions, even before the current uprising. Its newspaper was perhaps the chief focal point of the embryonic movement. When the original conflicts broke out this summer, K.O.R. militants were on the scene in the Gdansk shipyards to help turn a series of isolated explosions into a rapidly-maturing mass movement.

Whether or not K.O.R., or elements within it, can provide the necessary organizational and political lead is impossible to say. K.O.R. is politically diffuse. It includes Catholics and Marxists, reformers and revolutionaries. Its leaders have been quoted on both sides of every crucial question. But such quotations tell us very little since the K.O.R. can not be understood in isolation from the mind-shaping events they have all just passed through. If the intellectuals have successfully influenced the workers, that process is a two-way street. The power of the workers' offensive can not but astonish and teach the intellectuals as well, and shape their perspectives as part of the revolutionary current.

Whether the K.O.R. is a party, or "the party," or a stage in the evolution of a party remains to be seen. Nonetheless, such an organization is needed, and will, in particular have to help clarify and confront three enormous issues facing the Polish workers if they wish to go forward: (1) the role of the Catholic church; (2) the question of reform or revolution; (3) the international character of the Polish revolution.

### The Role of the Church

The influence of the Catholic church within the workers movement is obvious, and all too understandable. For generations the church identified itself with Poland's struggle against national oppression and the right of the Polish nation to self-determination. Socialists cannot be indifferent to those aspirations. We have, historically, understood that support for the national liberation of oppressed people is indispensable to winning their adherence to socialist ideals. The imposition of the Polish regime by force of Russian arms after World War II at once weakened the cause of socialism and strengthened the church's symbolic association with the cause of the Polish nation.

The operation of the post-war Polish regime has served to strengthen the church in other ways as well. In the absence of institutions through which dissent could be expressed, the church has been able to function as the instrument of opposition forces of all sorts. This has naturally tended to push opposition elements in the direction of the church. In particular, the Polish state bureaucracy's hostility to any independent workers' organization has tended to strengthen the church's influence in the working class. Specifically, the church has been enabled to play a broker role between the government and the workers. Thus the church attempts to pacify the workers movement when it gets out of hand and in exchange the government concedes it a stronger position and greater privileges in Poland. How far the church is willing to go can be seen in its willingness to place its representative in the government as deputy minister.

It is critical to distinguish between the Polish workers' acceptance of the Catholic religion and their adherence to the *political* leadership of the church. So far, the working class' religious convictions have not led it to follow the church's *political* directions. When then the political interests of the workers' movement have come into conflict with the orders of the hierarchy, the workers have ignored the hierarchy. In late August, at a time when the workers' movement was reaching its crest and threatening to impose a humiliating defeat on the government, the Polish archbishop appealed to the workers to step back. They ignored his advice, and the church suffered a significant loss of political credibility. Then again, in October, the government was threatening to renege on the commitments it had made to the workers in last summer's strikes. Solidarity, in turn, was threatening a general strike. The church again counseled moderation. But the workers once more pressed ahead with their demands and were again victorious.

Still the influence of the church and of the Catholic religion cannot be discounted, especially since the degree to which "official Marxism" has been discredited has left a massive residue of cynicism as to the meaning of socialism among the Polish people. In this context, the defeat of the church hierarchy is a process which is inseparable from the revival in Poland of new socialist ideas, which are dependent in turn upon the strengthening of independent institutions of the working class. Some socialists, especially in the West, have backed away from the insurgent working class in Poland on the grounds that it is "tainted" with religion. Yet, Polish revolutionaries can afford no such luxury. Only if conscious socialists are part of the developing struggle can they help to shape the pro-



cess so as to explicitly challenge the role of the church and of Catholic religion in Polish society. The church will not be defeated by restraining it administratively, but by showing that it cannot represent the real aspirations of the working class—the right to strike, the expansion of all civil liberties, in particular the liberation of women and, above all, the drive for power by the working class over all spheres of life. In turn, these demands must themselves be shown to be inextricably inter-related—to manifest a vision of a truly new social order in which people can actually control their own destinies.

### Reform or Revolution?

The demands won in the strike wave of 1980 are not unprecedented. In 1956, 1970, 1976, the working class went into action, temporarily defeated the bureaucracy, and appeared to have won far-reaching gains. Nevertheless, each of the working class mobilizations was followed by determined campaigns by the bureaucracy to withdraw the concessions which had been granted. Each time the bureaucracy succeeded. Of course, the most recent reforms may not be so easily taken back. But the bureaucracy's repeated attempts to do so confirm its intentions once again.

The point is that the interests of the bureaucracy and those of the workers in Poland are incompatible. Because the bureaucracy's interest as a group conflicts with that of the working class, and because the source of its power over production and society lies in its monopoly control over the state, the bureaucracy's chosen instrument, the CP, must be a top-down machine allowing little or no internal democracy. Were the party democratic, it would be subject to the influence of the working class who might use this instrument to threaten the bureaucracy's monopoly of state power and over production.

In contrast, the capitalist class in the West has the luxury of at times allowing workers' parties to exist and compete for some say in government. This is possible precisely because, under capitalism, the major decisions concerning production are *not* made by the government but by the capitalist class which, through its control of production, ultimately determines government policy.

The Polish working class can therefore in no way simply take hold of the existing state apparatus. It has to destroy the apparatus and replace it by an administration run from top to bottom by workers themselves. This system will have to be rooted in committees based on the workplace, which committees manage the enterprise, coordinate the links between plants in a given industry or area, and, through their representatives, help draw up a plan for the economy.

It is critical to emphasize, that in the period immediately following a revolution and the installation of a workers state, the working class will in no way be able to dispense with independent trade unions. For in the earliest stages of setting up a socialist economy and society, there are likely to arise powerful bureaucratic elements. Economic scarcity, the early difficulties of involving the working class in managing economic activities, and the need initially to retain an eight hour day, instead of cutting it—all of these lay the potential material basis for the continued existence of a bureaucratic layer.

The tension between this layer and the working class will not be overcome by fiat, but only by changed con-

sciousness, improved economic conditions, and a shorter workday (to give people time for political involvement). So long as the tension persists, workers' rule will require more than the system of councils. Unions will also continue to be needed, in order to defend workers' rights and immediate interests against initially powerful bureaucratic forces. It will be necessary, in short, to defend workers "even against their own state apparatus." Such unions would necessarily have the right to strike.

Today, many Polish working people are no doubt beginning to think, in quite concrete terms, about the radical transformation of their society. But the process of getting from where they are now to where they want to go must necessarily seem incredibly unclear and difficult. In particular, there will be every tendency to believe that the process can take place more or less continuously, through penetrating the state apparatus and through constructing alternative workers institutions such as Solidarity. There are two obvious reasons why such a reform road will appear especially attractive. In the first place, Solidarity has already extracted such tremendous gains, and seems capable of winning many more, bit by bit. On the other hand, there is the great and very real worry about the intervention of Russian troops.

It seems clear therefore that many in the Polish working class movement have, at least for the moment, adopted a specific *tactic*: win and consolidate a few critical victories *now*, but then *go slow*. Use the "captured terrain" as the basis for further assaults later. This seems to be the significance of the movement's focus on winning free trade unions. These can presumably provide some sort of power base, a lever for extracting gains in the future.

We are certainly in no position to evaluate the tactics of the Polish movement. One can not know in advance the precise limits of the struggle for reforms in Poland. The fact that the bureaucracy succeeded in erasing the gains of past upsurges points to the long-run, organic incompatibility of workers power and bureaucratic power. But it does not preclude that a vigilant and defiant working class will be more successful this time round. Indeed, the struggle for reforms is an essential part of the process of building a more class conscious, coherent, revolutionary working class. It is only by deepening and politicizing that struggle that the working class can create the consciousness and the political institutions which are indispensable to preserve partial victories and to resolve the fundamental conflict.

Unfortunately, the situation does not allow the Polish workers to confine their struggle to Poland alone. Their success is inseparable from that of the workers' movement in all of Eastern Europe. To defend their own movement, they are compelled to encourage the development of parallel movements in other East European countries.

We would only emphasize, in conclusion, that in our view, there can be no successful *strategy* of slow and continuous "march through the institutions" of Polish society culminating in workers power—no socialism through reforms, though it is essential to fight for those reforms as part of a revolutionary process. Neither the Polish nor the Russian bureaucracies would stand by and allow this process to succeed, anymore than U.S. capital would. They would forcefully step in to protect their established positions. Confronting this extraordinarily difficult problem is undoubtedly the central task facing Polish revolutionaries today.



# A Tale of Two Cities: Gdansk and San Diego

by STAN WEIR

**A**t the time of this writing, August 1980, two large shipyards separated by 8,000 miles have been closed by illegal strikes. The fate of the sit-in at the Vladimir Illyich Lenin yard in Gdansk and of the pre-revolutionary development of which it is the initiator, is still undetermined. The National Steel and Shipyard Company of San Diego, California is running again. Thirty-two of the rank and file strike leaders at the latter yard, all members of the Ironworkers Local 627, have been fired. Their future awaits lengthy determinations by showcase arbitrators, victim by victim.

The dissimilarities between these two struggles are many. But there are ways in which the likenesses take on profound importance. Both groups of workers broke routine conduct to do open battle in defiance of their immediate employers, the law, top government officials and union officials. The strike weapon was illegal for both. The Polish maritime workers in Gdansk ignored direct government edict. The Americans had to break the unconditional no-strike and arbitration clauses of their collective bargaining contract.

Both strikes were sparked by harsh employer disciplinary offensives. The background of events in the Polish strike has been more widely reported. Lines are more clearly drawn and people more easily named. Anna Walentynowicz was a leader of the 1970 strikes in the Gdansk yard. By the mid-1970's she was part of an alliance between workers in the yard and a group of dissident intellectuals. She was also an outspoken proponent for free trade unions and against those controlled by the Communist Party-State. In early August, one month before her retirement, she was fired. That act, as she told a television reporter, "was simply the drop that made an already bitter cup run over." Later she was quoted as saying that the real reason for the outbreak was the "...lying and cheating the Government does." She was forcibly rehired after a hearing before a labor court.

According to pickets on duty in front of the NASSCO yard, management has made it a habit to begin victimizing militant stewards in the months before the opening of contract negotiations. In late July a popular steward was fired and the ranks perceived the act as the in-pattern opening shot. On August 2, during a launching ceremony for a new warship, about 50 local leaders and shop stewards demonstrated against the firings and poor working conditions. As a result it was supposedly impossible for the Undersecretary of the Navy to make his speech. The company retaliated by firing 17 of the demonstrators. About half were local union officers. The Ironworkers Local then shut down the yard. The workers in all seven of the other unions in the yard

(6,000 workers) came out in solidarity. Women were prominent in the strike leadership.

Local 627 is said to have a history of taking job actions to obtain the quick settlement of grievances and was already under tension with officers of their international union. The international sent two top officers from Washington, D.C., who began a back to work movement, undercutting the largest local in their union, and in the process destroying attempts at open solidarity from the ranks of the other unions in the yard. More firings followed, bringing the total to thirty-two. Among them were the two top leaders of Local 627, Reynaldo Inchaurregui and Miguel Salas. The fired leaders were put in the position of urging their own ranks to go back to work to avoid continued violation of the contract. Their ability to justify their work stoppage as a response to an illegal employer offensive had been undercut by the international. They called for a continuation of the struggle "on the inside," the only way that concessions can be forced from neutral arbitrators.

In the course of the attack on the local leadership there was talk about the presence of "communists," much in the same way that the Polish strike leaders were accused of being under the influence of "anti-socialist elements."

There are other important parallels between the two shipyard fights and the people who conducted them. Both groups of workers were invisible in the media, until they quit work. Television, press and radio have never reported what the San Diego workers do on the job when production is going. It is more than likely that the same is true in Gdansk. But most important to this discussion are the similarities in the work cultures of the two workplaces.

In each of the shipyards the employees developed leaders loyal to them. This doesn't happen straight-away by official election. The leaders are symbols of a complex process and are but one of its products. The process begins in informal work groups with the *socialization necessary to the performance of the job*. It graduates to *fun socialization* and then escalates to a *socialization for mutual protection*. Leaders emerge in the groups by natural selection. In turn, from among their number, workplace leaders come forth with sufficient backing to challenge official union bureaucrats. At the Lenin and NASSCO yards these native organizations took over. The organizational development process would have been impossible without the support of a fighting work culture. During the course of the three already mentioned forms of socialization, the participants analyze areas of their experience, find attitudes in common, make evaluations and come to agree-



ments. Actions of (and personalities among) the opponents get labeled and nicknamed. All of this acts to legitimize the side that is "us." Finally, it enables defeat of the fear that stands in the way of action. As submission wanes, group cultures and resources are merged. Out of the boldness that makes the alliances possible, departmental cultures are forged. The integration of department cultures establishes a workplace culture which takes its place in the occupational culture.

In Gdansk and San Diego we have witnessed strikes, but also the existence of cultures which are related despite lack of direct contact. Experience with similar technology, conflict with employers and common human need reveal what sociologists call the "cultural convergences" or the universals in the two events.

Having first of all focused on the similarities between the two strikes, it is now possible to comment on some of the differences. The San Diego strike ended in what is probably a form of defeat, even though a temporary one. It was forced into isolation before it was a week old, by sell-out. The International Ironworkers' top officials bypassed the ranks of all the supporting unions in the yard and undercut their ability to strike in solidarity with the Ironworkers Local 627. On its side the international had the employers, the government and the entire body of labor law. The Taft-Hartley Act, with its anti-secondary boycott and pro-arbitration provisions, has been in effect more than thirty years. For almost two generations American workers have been denied the legal right to strike in solidarity. The ranks of the various locals involved in the San Diego strike, like most in America, have not yet had those experiences together which allow a break-out—to know that, finally, only independent self-organization right in the workplaces can be relied upon to obtain victory. As it is now, when international union officials move against rank and file initiatives, their victories are assured as long as the ranks stay inside existing procedures and organization where they are defenseless.

By contrast, in Poland, we have seen a great victory. This, due in large part to the fact that the strikes there rely purely on the ranks and are not isolated from each other. Leading formations in that labor force, by example, offered to other sections around them a workable alternative to those supplied by official unions and legal procedures. A responsive chord was thus struck in the imagination of the entire working class. Opportunity

was supplied to take action which would bring real gains, not just peanuts, and in which each participant could sense that his or her individual effort had made a difference.

In the Gdansk shipyard, on the docks of Szczecin, among the journalists of Warsaw, in the mines of Silesia and many more, Polish workers began their break-out by building organizations based on the communication network of the informal work groups which form naturally on every job the world over. By the very nature of these factory and workplace committees they were pyramided as the need arose to create area-wide councils of rank and file workers—the highest form of labor organization short of uniting the councils as a replacement for existing government.

It is probable that in the aftermath of the San Diego strike there will be attempts by the employer, international unions and government (through the FBI) to seek out "radicals," just as the Polish Communist officials at all levels are now planning to do. And, as in Poland, the actual target will not be just the radicals. Hunts of this sort are always used to create an atmosphere of general harassment and thereby the "neutralization" of the entire workplace community. When this succeeds, defeat is assured. The intimidation, for a time, destroys not only local union strengths, but the unity of the informal work groups which are the foundation of working class power.

In more than a dozen years of teaching courses for shop stewards in labor education programs I have found only a few who were already familiar with the term *informal work group* and the directly related term *work culture*. But, in every case, only the briefest introduction to the concepts created recognition, and more, instant insight as to their uses. The first reaction is invariably joy of discovery and revelation, followed by a brief period of exasperation with self for not having seen "the obvious" sooner. "We've been living in these groups all our lives and doing these things and were so close to them and it all comes about so naturally that we are blind to it. Why is this the first time that this subject matter has been brought to our attention?" The self-criticism never lasts long because all present have found previously unrecognized strength sources and higher self-esteem, all due to focus on a subject virtually ignored by both union and radical political organizations.

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# Inside the Lenin Shipyards

## An Eyewitness Report

By ERIC BRENNER and CHERYL STANWOOD

**W**e arrived in Gdansk early in the evening of August 26. Our first impression was the stark contrast with Warsaw. Here all the stores were open. Unlike Warsaw, there were no lines outside the food stores. We learned that farmers sympathetic to the strike had been delivering truckloads of food to the shipyards nearly every day.

The strike had, during the previous weekend, entered a crucial stage. The government had finally agreed to negotiate the twenty-one demands of the Inter-Factory Strike Committee led by two veterans of the 1970 and 1976 strikes, Lech Walesa and Anna Walentinowicz. The presence of these two leaders was symptomatic of the fact that this strike represented a new departure in Poland's industrial scene.

There had been wide-spread earlier strikes that summer, but of a radically different character. Thus, the first major response to the July 1 hike in meat prices was from railway workers in Lublin. They found ham being shipped to Moscow for the Olympics and immediately shut down the railroad. This action rapidly spread into a general strike in Lublin, which lasted five days until the government agreed to wage increases and new elections to Party-controlled unions. Similar strikes spread to various cities throughout Poland during July and early August, but all were pacified by economic concessions.

But when the Lenin shipyard workers took their action, there was a crucial difference. The workers, not Walesa initially, insisted on far-ranging demands of a political character—from free, independent trade unions and the right to strike, to an end to censorship and the freeing of political prisoners. These demands became a rallying cry for workers throughout the country.

It was no accident that the Gdansk workers took this explosive initiative. The workers in the Baltic area, and particularly at the Lenin Shipyards—the nation's largest with 17,000 workers—had a long history of the most militant and political activity. In the 1970 strikes, scores of demonstrators were killed by police in Gdansk. In strikes in 1976, free trade union formations were organized briefly in the Baltic area. When the intellectual, dissident Workers' Self-Defense Committee (KOR) was organized that same year, some of its closest ties were with the Gdansk workers. During the years between 1976 and 1980 the KOR newspaper, *Robotnik* (Worker) gained influence. At the same time militant workers throughout the Baltic area developed communications so that by 1979 they had begun publishing an underground free trade union newspaper called the *Baltic Worker*. It was the activity of this group in loose association with KOR that helped develop the political nature of the strike and the successful efforts to spread out.

### TWO DAYS IN THE LENIN SHIPYARD

**T**uesday morning we set out for the shipyard. We took the train toward the center of Gdansk and all along

the way we passed factories where people stood in groups talking. Nationalist sentiment was symbolically high. The red and white flags of pre-war Poland were flying everywhere, from the engine cars of trains, from factory gates, from the overhang of industrial cranes—the red star was conspicuously absent.

When we reached the Lenin shipyard gate, at least 1000 people were milling about, calling to workers inside. The gate itself, a barrier of cross-grilled iron bars, was laced with flowers and plastered with pictures of Jesus Christ and the Pope. No Marx or Lenin. Workers inside the gate were causing a stir as they passed mimeographed sheets among themselves and to the crowd outside. We learned that these leaflets were in fact the strike bulletins that the strike committee was publishing with the help of KOR.

The pre-strike patterns of the work-day were laid aside by the workers as they listened minute-by-minute to the strike negotiations. Seated on makeshift benches fashioned from nearby construction materials, the crowd, like the workers inside the yard, sat and listened to the factory loudspeakers broadcasting the exchanges between Jagielski and Lech Walesa.

During a break in the negotiations, we heard a leftist trade union representative from Norway deliver a solidarity message to the strikers. A friend, a student dissident, managed to get passes for us to go inside by saying we were representatives from a workers' organization in the United States. We entered the shipyard and declared our solidarity and support for the free trade union but cautioned the strikers against modeling their free trade unions on the bureaucratized unions of western countries, with which I have had some direct experience.

We walked to the administration building where the strike committee was stationed. As the cushioned upholstery testified, this building was normally management's domain and not frequented by workers. Passes were required for entrance to strike headquarters and these were restricted for the most part to strike representatives and to the press. Workers outside the building took turns crowding up to the windows to peer inside.

There was a break in negotiations shortly after we arrived at the strike headquarters and we were fortunate enough to interview some of the strike leaders. Their time was limited, but we managed to ask them about the long-term goals of the strike and the process of democratic participation within the strike committees.

We wanted to know if the leaders had a clear political perspective for both the current strikes and beyond. The workers all asserted they were not "political." We found out, however, that to them "politics" was synonymous with *Party* politics—a generally derogatory term in Poland. When we got a little more specific we found that, despite definitions, their ideas on the union movement were very political. The most consistent comment we heard, from the leaders, delegates and strikers inside and



outside the shipyard, was the crucial importance of winning their number one demand—free and independent trade unions. It was a non-negotiable demand. They felt that once they had won independent unions they would have the power to gain further concessions later. We were told many times that, if the government didn't meet other demands or failed to fulfill their agreements, they would not hesitate to strike again in the future.

But what did the workers really want to gain from these strikes and from their on-going organization? They were reluctant to answer such questions. In fact, they were quite skilled at evading questions that they considered too controversial. Gradually, however, they presented us with a fairly cohesive set of perspectives, that gave us some insights into their political goals. They were not hesitant to criticize the government bureaucracy and the lack of democracy which they felt was the basic cause of inept economic planning. They emphasized their belief that if workers had real involvement and control in economic decisions the country wouldn't be in such bad economic shape. There was no concrete strategy for actually solving the complex economic situation (such as the role of the international market), but they consistently talked about the need to democratize governmental decision-making in order to prevent such problems as massive economic waste and government corruption. Despite their claims to be "not political," this was a central goal of the independent trade union.

Many of the strikers and supporters we spoke with wanted increased democratization and workers control as a means of gaining better living and working conditions for Polish people. They didn't believe it was necessary for them to pay for the economic crisis with higher prices and increased speed-up. In fact, most seemed to feel that they should be able to have increasingly better conditions, particularly with regard to consumer goods. We found that some were influenced by what they had heard about western capitalist countries. No one we spoke to supported the reinstitution of private enterprise or capitalist property relations in Poland. However, many of the workers we spoke too had serious misconceptions about western democracy and freedoms. They looked at western trade unions and their higher standard of living (many Poles have relatives in the U.S.) and concluded that workers really have power in the West. By equating bourgeois democracy with some kind of workers' power, some people we talked to felt that the U.S. would come in to support the workers if the Russians invaded Poland. Despite such misconceptions, however, even if some of the workers looked to the West, what they *believed* they were working towards was workers' power and not capitalism.

We also asked about the relations between themselves and the workers they represented. We wanted to know if the leaders felt there was any problem in achieving the goal of democratic participation they had set for themselves. They didn't think there was a problem. The issues, they said, were clear-cut and the workers supported the leadership. They described their system by which representatives from the strike committee were charged with returning to their plants to coordinate feedback from workers there. Nevertheless, it seemed that many of the strike representatives remained in the shipyard full-time and did not return to their plants regularly.

## PEOPLE WE MET

Our perceptions of the strike were formed as much by the people we met in Gdansk as by our own observations. In the Lenin Shipyard, the cross-cut of students, professors, journalists and workers from all trades offered a wide-range of attitudes towards Polish politics and culture.

One example was a conversation we had with a Warsaw journalist, who was a Party member, but seemed a little uneasy about it. He divulged the fact of his membership rather reluctantly late in our conversation. At first he said he supported the strikers and understood that they had legitimate grievances. However, he immediately qualified this statement by referring to the dangers of social disorder and "things getting out of control." He became defensive and evasive when we asked him questions about government policy or censorship of the press. He changed the subject by bringing up the possible radicalizing effect the strikes could have on workers in capitalist countries. It seemed to us that his oblique responses to our questions and his manner of forced nonchalance were actually a cover for the fears he felt about how the Gdansk events might affect his position. And indeed, as we were talking, a member of the strike committee approached us and whispered to me, "You know that guy is full of shit."

Later the committeeman told us there had been a heated debate early in the strike when some of the delegates, including himself, had wanted to kick the reporter out as well as a few other Polish journalists covering the events. They were accused of writing false reports on the strike and for being Party spies. But the majority voted to let them stay if they would give more complete and accurate reports on the strike.

We met a physics professor from Gdansk University. He had been inside the strike committee headquarters although he wasn't actually a representative. For him the crucial issue was the lack of intellectual freedom in Poland. He felt that innovative science and technological development had been inhibited by the restraints placed on academic research. He would, however, not openly identify the bureaucracy as the primary obstacle. Despite the contradiction, he insisted that the strike was not a rebellion against the Communist Party. The workers, he said, did not challenge the basic authority of the bureaucracy. However, when we spoke to others in the shipyard, dissident students and young workers, their feelings were very different. In fact, they were vehement in their criticism of the Party: they blamed the central bureaucracy for every ill that besieged Poland; they were very down on the Party, which was notorious for its misuse of privilege. At the same time, we were told there was a high percentage of rank and file Party members in the Gdansk area who supported the strikes and even a few who were strike committee representatives.

In 1976 in Radom, workers, enraged by the amount of meat and sausage they found inside the Party's committee building screamed, "Look how the bastards live!" In 1980, in an atmosphere of workers' control and discipline in Gdansk, stories still circulated about the corruption of Party bureaucrats. The workers did not attack Party headquarters as they had done in 1970, and alcohol was banned by the strike committee to inhibit violence on the part of workers. But midway down the list of twenty-one demands was the abolition of privileges for security services and the elimination of special shops for police and party officials.



## Against the Current

What about the political power of the free trade union? When we asked this question, the workers answered that the strikes were not political. They maintained that a free trade union would give them the leverage they needed to achieve their other demands later. There was the suggestion in what they said that the demand for an independent union was a first step in the present crisis, but it wasn't the last step in a longer struggle towards workers' control.

### WOMEN AND REVOLUTION

The strike committee consisted of nearly 500 people, representing plants that were shut down all over Gdansk and in nearby cities. There were about 75 women on the committee and while the ratio of women to men seemed quite low in the Lenin Shipyard, it was our impression that women on the strike committee represented factories in Gdansk in which many or all of the employees were women. Women typed documents for the negotiating team and women in headscarves served the strike committee their meals. No one, neither men nor women workers, seemed to question this arrangement. We approached one young intellectual on the issue of sexism and he assured us that Polish women had equal access to employment and that working mothers had ample child-care available to them. We were a little skeptical of this given our own observations within the shipyard and felt confirmed in our doubts when this man admitted that while he himself did some housework, he still felt that the raising of children was the responsibility of women. There can be no doubt that the workers' demands in the Lenin Shipyard were a vital challenge to the authority of the government bureaucracy, but we did not feel that the strike action went beyond certain self-imposed limitations. Beyond the immediate conflict with the government, such issues as unequal relations at work or patriarchal attitudes were not confronted by the workers. In the dining hall, for example, the kitchen staff, again mostly women, remained at their jobs without pay to cook for the strikers.

### KOR

Our most vocal contact during our two days in the shipyard was a dissident student from Krakow called Anna. She had helped to organize a strike support committee and independent student group at Krakow University in opposition to the Party-authorized student union. Anna had come to Gdansk to support the strike as well as to avoid being arrested in Krakow for the organizing she had done there. She was the furthest left critic we met in the shipyard and when she realized that we were Marxists and had come to Gdansk in solidarity with the strikers she was very open and informative. While Anna was close politically to KOR (Workers' Self-Defense Committee) she was critical of the role KOR played in relation to the strike leadership. She also felt that KOR members were too visible amongst the strike committee members, that they were exposing themselves to government retaliation later, as workers and intellectuals had done in 1970 and 1976 when protesters against the government had been beaten or fired from their jobs.

Despite this concern, Anna was generally enthusiastic about the contributions KOR was making to communications during the strike such as teaching strikers how to put out bulletins on the printing press they provided and helping in drafting documents for negotiation. Anna felt

that KOR could have allowed the workers to operate more independently. In fact, no KOR members were present in the negotiation room where three workers, including Anna Walentynowicz, sat with three "specialists" for the workers side, professors from the University.

The cooperation between Polish workers and intellectuals during the strike was quite remarkable—an exemplary precedent for united struggle anywhere in the world. Anna, a student supporter of the strike, explained that KOR was initially very isolated from working people but that more recently the organization had gradually gained many workers' respect and support due to its conscious orientation towards the workers' movement. From its inception in the aftermath of the 1976 uprising, KOR's primary role within Polish dissent has been to publicize political repression. But KOR activities have gone beyond mere defense and exposure. Its newspaper, *Robotnik* (Worker) had at the time of the strikes a circulation of over 40,000 readers.

KOR has also sought to invigorate Polish culture against the ruinous effect of official censorship. "Liberated" presses print the works of dissident Polish writers as well as translations of western literature.

The "Flying University" was created by KOR; it consists of a series of underground lectures offered in universities throughout Poland in which KOR presents an alternative viewpoint to official positions. There is a great deal of support for these lectures.

Anna was extremely critical of Polish nationalism and religion. She explained that various small dissident nationalist groups exist in Poland but there is significant disharmony among them. None of the nationalist groups, in Anna's view, had any real influence in the strikes. While on the one hand, Anna felt that KOR should be more critical of nationalism and religion which she viewed as conservatizing aspects of Polish life, she was also quick to point out the difficulty of raising such criticism without alienating the majority of the workers' movement. It is crucial that KOR does distinguish itself as explicitly pro-socialist, she felt, but she emphasized that, in her view, intellectuals should play a supportive but not a leading role in the workers' movement.

In 1968, Jacek Kuron, a leading figure in KOR (who had been imprisoned during the August strikes so that we were unable to contact him) and Karol Modzelewski wrote a pamphlet in which they called "revolution" the "grave-digger of the old society" and "creator of the new" Poland! By 1980 Kuron's revolutionary position, faced with the reality of Soviet intervention, had become more guarded: "Certainly we shall have to coexist, for a while, with our existing totalitarian state and party machine. We must assume that it will do everything possible to destroy our democratic organizations and to undermine our decisions. It will try to compromise and corrupt militants; it will use intimidation and blackmail. We must defend ourselves and bit by bit try to win some of the territory occupied by the system. Consequently the task of the self-management organisms will grow and grow."

### THE CHURCH

One of the most complicated factors in the history of the Polish workers' movement is the role of the Church. Certainly the presence of Catholicism was very evident through the Lenin Shipyard. Everyday all the



striking workers came together in the central yard to celebrate mass said by a local priest. We were rather alarmed by the sight of these religious images since we knew that the Catholic hierarchy in Poland is really opposed to any real independent, socialist-oriented workers movement. When we actually got a chance to talk to some of the strikers about religion, we found however, that the role of the Church was contradictory. The people we talked to regarded the Church as a symbol of freedom, and an independent opposition to the bureaucratic leadership. Catholicism provided them with a sense of spiritualism and unity that the Communist Party structure does not offer. On the other hand the Church hierarchy has tried to use its influence to hold back the workers' movement. This was evidenced during our stay by Cardinal Wyzinski, head of the Polish Church, who broadcast a sermon calling for "prudence" and appealing to the workers for moderation and a return to work. The crucial factor, however, was that this appeal was totally ignored by the strikers throughout the country. When we asked some of the strikers about this we got some very telling responses. One smiling mustachioed young worker explained that the Cardinal had probably been confused; what he had actually meant to say in his address was that the Church supported the workers and their strike. No matter how much we questioned the strikers about the Church's position, they continued to insist that however it might seem to us, the Church supported the workers' struggle 100%.

We were convinced that these workers do not follow the reactionary political leadership of the Church but instead create their own interpretations of the Church's position to support their own movement.

## WE LEAVE GDANSK

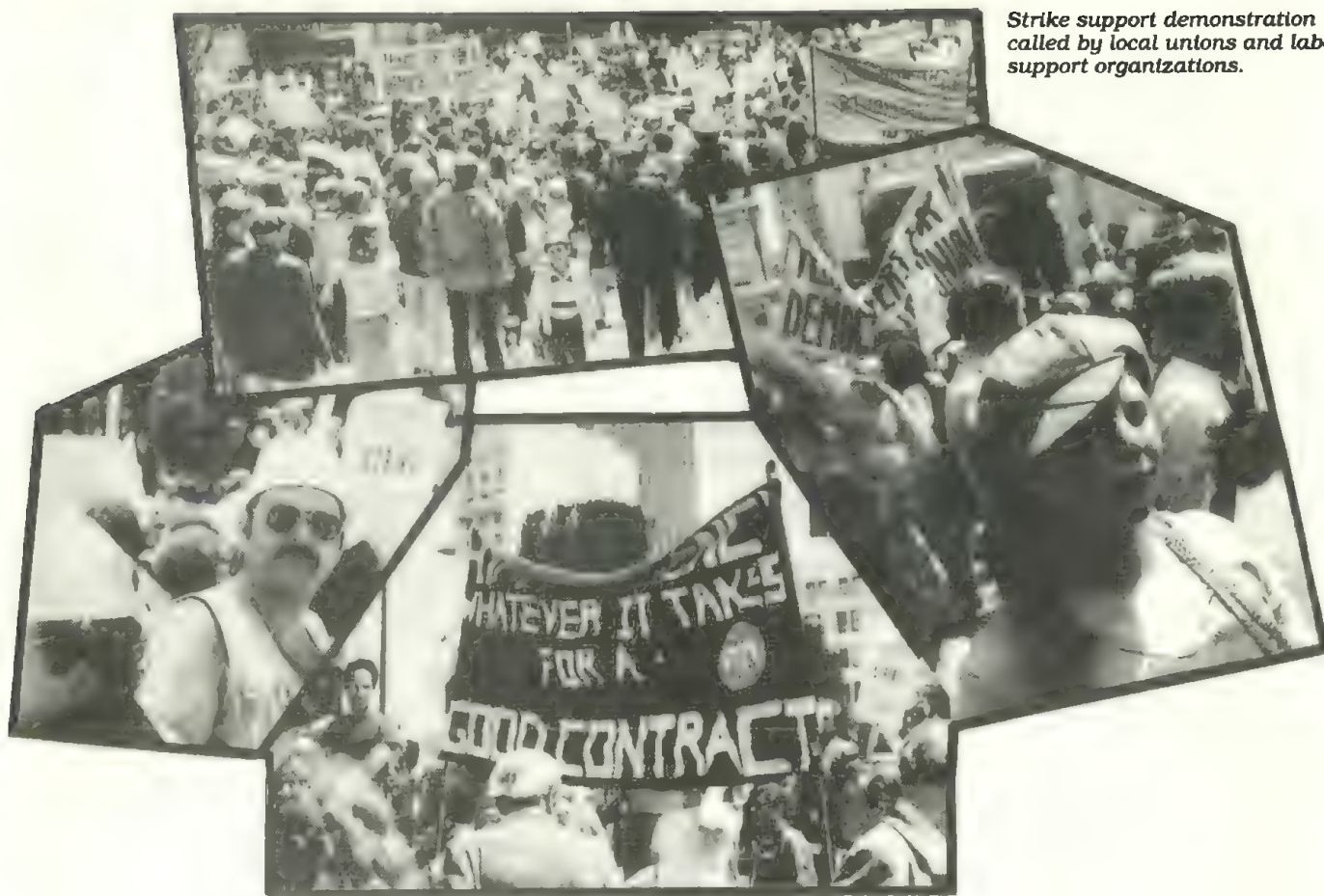
By the time we were getting ready to leave the shipyard, the general mood was one of optimism. Victory for the free trade union was at hand. Solidarity was more than the name of the new union. It was a spirit shared by all the workers we met in Gdansk and by intellectuals and cultural workers as well. As we were preparing to leave Gdansk we saw new signs of the strike's depth. The Baltic Philharmonic had come to the shipyard to entertain the strikers and other groups had sung and danced and put on plays for the workers. As we left the shipyard the serenity of Gdansk's renaissance architecture contrasted with the red brick functionalism of the shipyards. For a moment it was as if we had taken a step backwards in time. But we were very much in the present in the city where years of anger and frustration had caused workers to challenge the authority of the system and to win victories.

A young worker in blue overalls described to us the first day of the strike in the Lenin Shipyard. He came to work to find that his fellow workers were milling around grumbling about the rise in meat prices. As grumbling grew to protest, the workers gathered in a large group raising issues beyond the meat prices. "What about the right to strike?" they said. "What about a free trade union?" "How about closing down the special shops for party bureaucrats?" As the workers' discontent swelled so did the size of the crowd and soon they were hammering at management's door to present their demands. When the boss stepped down from his office, he said to the workers, "Who is your representative?" In a single voice, they shouted, "We all are!"



Meeting of national delegates of strikers at Lenin shipyards.





Strike support demonstration called by local unions and labor support organizations.

# HOTEL

## Rank & File Battle in San Francisco

By VINCENT J. PALMER

**O**n the face of it, the strike of 5,000 hotel workers in San Francisco last summer might seem a less-than-momentous event in U.S. labor history. In fact however, for a range of related reasons, it had an importance far exceeding its appearance. Its weight stemmed from several considerations: (1) the fact that there was, *and remains*, an exceptionally strong, independent R&F movement in the hotel union; (2) the fact that the workers involved were overwhelmingly third world women; (3) the fact that the SF labor movement has traditionally been perhaps the most aggressive and radical in the country. For despite the decline of the Warehousemen's union, the 1934 General Strike led by the ILWU, remains a live tradition. In addition, a layer of "old left" organizers provided an important link with the past. These experienced militants helped the "New Left" in the Bay Area bypass much of the anti-working class bias which was so prevalent nationally in the New Left in the early '70's. This history served to slow down the retreat of labor and provided a context for con-

tinuous resistance, if few immediate victories. However, the economy of San Francisco has changed substantially in the past decades. San Francisco, like other cities, has experienced its own capital flight, with the usual debilitating effect on the morale of the city's working class and its objective circumstances. For a time, this decline was held in seeming check by the construction boom and the consequent health of the construction unions. But by 1980, unionism as a social force had severely shrunk in San Francisco, falling from 52% of the work force to only 35% in 1975.

Finally, the hotel strike occurred in the context of a recent history of defeats and demoralizations within the unions—the teachers' strike, the BART strike, and in particular, the smashing defeat of the Teamster grocery workers' strike. In all these cases, defeat had resulted in the serious weakening if not destruction of the local R&F organizations. What is unique about the hotel strike, is, as we shall see, that the R&F organizations survived the strike in relatively good shape.

Still another defeat lies in the background, mute but powerful in its impact. This is the decline in weight, morale and leadership which the ILWU once exercised in

*[Vincent J. Palmer is the nom de guerre of a relatively obscure Bay area journalist, who suffers from a character disorder, multiple personality.]*



the Bay Area, and which it definitively surrendered when it capitulated to the containerization demands of the shipping bosses. One result of this has been that genuine strike support by the Central Labor Council is now the rare exception, not the rule, as the striking hotel workers were to discover.

## EXIT BELARDI: ENTER THE RANKS

**I**n October 1975, Joe Belardi, the President of Local 2 of the Hotel workers union was at the height of his power. The six locals in San Francisco had just been merged by the international union into a single industrial union under Belardi. While this new structure created the potential for greater striking power, that was not Belardi's aim in the merger. The real effect, in the short run, was to increase the centralization of the union, increase the power of the appointed business agents (B.A.s) weaken the authority of the shop stewards, and increase the control of the executive board by the full time B.A.s. And, since Belardi was also the president of the San Francisco Central Labor Council, he was indeed a force to be reckoned with.

But the merger was to prove to be Belardi's undoing. For the consolidation of the six culinary locals, meant to centralize Belardi's power, also made it possible for militants from throughout the industry to coordinate their efforts. Consequently, opposition activity increased sharply and rank and file caucuses (beginning with the Concerned Culinary Workers in 1975 and the Restaurant Contract Committee in 1976) started to organize. So when Belardi tried to ram through a \$2 dues increase at a February, 1977 membership meeting, he received the shock of his political life. Several thousand workers turned out to vote down the increase. Many had been organized for the meeting by the Ad Hoc Committee Against the Dues Increase (a group initiated by the Restaurant Contract Committee).

## VICTORY AND DEFEAT

**I**n late 1977, the opposition cohered as the Alliance of the Rank and File (ARF). ARF put forward a program which included demands for a strong shop stewards program, a rank and file negotiating committee, no paid staffers on the local's executive board, and a limit on officials' salaries. But its main thrust was organizing a Dump Belardi slate for the April elections. ARF tended to focus too narrowly on unseating Belardi and his appointed business agents. It did too little to educate workers about what would be necessary to fundamentally change conditions when fighting multi-national, luxury hotel owners, in a period when labor is under attack. But none of this diminishes the importance of the April, 1978 election results: ARF's David McDonald defeated Belardi, while Charles Lamb and Winston Ching were elected vice-presidents (although Belardi supporters remained in control of the Executive Board). This victory raised the morale of the Local 2 ranks, shook up the fat cats on the Central Labor Council, and served as an example to militants everywhere that even the most powerful bureaucrats could be driven from office.

However, the shortcomings of ARF's electoral approach were not long in surfacing. Within months of the election, McDonald abandoned ARF and decided to go it alone. He balked at ARF's demand for a strong shop steward program; he refused to call for an internal audit of the local's

finances; he refused to limit his salary to that of his old, skilled job rate. He had been of course pledged to all these when he ran on ARF's slate. But he did not become Belardi's man either. Following the election, Belardi supporters disrupted every union meeting. They used their executive board majority to pressure McDonald. McDonald did try to implement some points of the ARF program, publishing the union newspaper in four languages and firing several of the worst business agents. He also went along, however reluctantly, with the popular sentiment for a strike against Zim's Restaurants—an ongoing union-busting drive, which Belardi had winked at. But less than a year after his election, McDonald buckled. He called on the International for assistance against the disruptions by the Belardi forces. Belardi supporters on the executive board were delighted and eagerly voted for "assistance" over ARF's opposition. And in less than a month, the International imposed full trusteeship on Local 2.

Vincent Sirabella, an officer of the international, was the man chosen by the international to apply the lid. He immediately suspended all Local 2 officers, canceled all meetings, and did away with all committees. He stepped into the Zim's strike and cut back strike benefits. In November, Sirabella fired ARF's Winston Ching from his vice-president spot, and later in the month canned McDonald when the latter filed suit against the trusteeship, charging betrayal by the International.

Despite these measures, rank and file militancy continued to spread. The Zim's strike ended in partial victory. The union-busting drive was halted. The elite St. Francis Hotel now became the site of sharpest struggle. There, maids started a slowdown against their taxing work load. When management responded with firings and suspensions, the maids organized the St. Francis Shop Steward Council, independent of Sirabella. At roughly the same time, maids began holding city-wide meetings. Local 2 had become a veritable hotbed of militancy despite the wet blanket thrown over it by trusteeship.

## THE 1979 CONTRACT REOPENER

Sirabella himself provided an opening for the opposition when he held elections to select a negotiating committee for the hotel contract *reopener* in March, 1979. The full contract did not expire until June 1980. The Coalition Against Trusteeship (CAT), an opposition group formed six months before, took a majority of the spots on this committee. It ran on a program that called for open negotiations, a strong shop stewards clause, affirmative action, job descriptions, promotions based on seniority, and preserving the right to strike in 1980.

No sooner had this group been voted in than it split on—of all things—whether to include Sirabella in the negotiations. Sirabella, it should be pointed out, was beginning to loose his grip. On the heels of the negotiating committee elections, a federal court ordered elections to end the trusteeship and effectively handed full authority in the reopener talks to the opposition—dominated committee. But rather than showing Sirabella the door, some members of the CAT slate actually declared they needed his "expertise." They provided the swing votes Sirabella needed to stay on the committee. Soon, he would be in full command of the reopener negotiations.

Why this deterioration? Earlier, we remarked on Sirabella's similarity to Belardi—but Sirabella was not Belardi.



## Against the Current

If nothing else, Sirabella quickly realized that he had a tiger by the tail in Local 2, and so he took a "left turn." Never breaking from the basic top-down business unionist conception, he did organize the first election of a negotiating committee in Local 2's history. Unwilling to mobilize the workers' abundant energies to turn back the bosses' offensive, he did put forward many decent demands (around issues like wages, vacations and holidays, meals, and craft rules). In short, Sirabella recognized the need to appear to separate himself somewhat from the Belardi forces and the international. The CAT members who helped him stay on the negotiating committee were not the first dissidents to be seduced by this seeming difference and believe they could use Sirabella. They would discover, in the end, that it was they who were used.

But as an outsider, Sirabella needed more than a militant posture. He needed a friendly face with credibility in the eyes of the membership. Charles Lamb filled the bill. Lamb had been elected vice-president on the ARF slate that threw out Belardi. He had a reputation in the local as a reformer and a medium image as a motorcycle-riding radical. In the May election, Lamb's reputation and image went a long way. Rank and file forces divided among themselves, got 60% of the vote for president, and still lost. Instead, Lamb was voted in with a 40% plurality—through the support of Sirabella and some of the old Belardi forces, and amid rumors of a behind-the-scenes deal to leave the real power with Sirabella and the international. In a month's time, he confirmed the rumored alliance by naming Sirabella chief negotiator in the reopener talks.

Rank and file oppositionists now proceeded to make some significant errors in the reopener negotiations—errors which foreshadowed mistakes to come in the following year's hotel strike. Despite their election platform of "open negotiations," most CAT representatives opted for meeting behind closed doors. There were no bulletins to keep the membership posted on the negotiations, no regular reports at all. The rank and file was not actively involved in the decision-making process, just as it had not been involved after McDonald's election. Consequently, Sirabella and Lamb (after much militant rhetoric at the bargaining table) were able to strike a deal with the Hotel Employers Association (HEA) to end the wage reopener negotiations and submit the contract to arbitration. They rammed this package through the negotiations committee. Thus, what began as an electoral victory for dissidents staggered to an inconclusive end.

### THE 1980 SHOWDOWN

The reopener negotiations were a minor skirmish before the war that was to come. The hotel contract expired on June 30, 1980. The heart of Local 2—5,000 to 6,000 workers (out of a local of 15,000), including the most militant sector (the maids)—would go up against a pillar of the San Francisco ruling class, the Hotel Employers Association (HEA). Its members, the Hyatt Regency, the St. Francis, the Hilton, and the other giants are part of diversified multi-nationals capable of absorbing the impact of a long strike.

In 1980, they would do just that. The HEA would go for blood. Its strategy was TAKEBACKS. Working conditions

were the focus of the attack. As Local 2 admitted, "The hotels are openly violating state labor law (and union contract) in making maids work without rest breaks and even meal periods in order to meet their room quotas." "In the past," picket captain Hawthorne explained, "the hotels never put up too much of a fight about taking this away because the contract was not enforced..., the contract was getting us 5%, 6%, 4% per year. There are lots of good things in the contract, that have never been enforced. But now we've been using our rights and really asserting them—that's why the hotels want to take them away."

HEA was willing to sustain a major strike loss in order to hold the line on labor costs. For decades, hotels have maximized profits through low wages and harsh conditions. One example: maids earn \$2.40 per room cleaned in hotels which charge \$100 daily per room.

The backbone of the hotel workforce are unskilled immigrants, "illegal aliens," members of oppressed groups—those at the bottom, those who can find nothing else. The bosses bank on these workers being too frightened to fight back—afraid of Immigration and Naturalization, of the language barrier, of just finding another job. But in Local 2, this situation was being reversed by a resurgent rank and file. Third World women and other oppressed people had shrugged off the risks to lead the most exploited sector, the maids, in open revolt against the employers and the union hacks. The danger was clear: If these oppressed sectors began to win real victories, their example could spread throughout the union and hence throughout the industry, threatening the sweetheart contracts in force throughout the land.

The HEA was honing its weapons for war. What of Local 2? For nearly a year preceding the contract expiration date, opposition groups circulated leaflets, petitions and newsletters to prepare for a strike. In December 1979, the largest of these groups, Workers for a Strong Union (WSU), agitated for and won proposals for an elected negotiating committee and a strike fund. Lamb supported this but Sirabella had learned his lesson with the previous negotiating committee and opposed electing a new one. By strike time, Sirabella and Lamb had patched up their differences. On March 25, 1980 a 25-member negotiating committee was elected. Once again, as in 1979, opposition groups were carrying sixteen seats (eleven by WSU, five by the rival Program for 1980).

The situation was now as follows: opposition groups controlled the negotiating committee, but were divided among themselves. Lamb and Sirabella controlled the executive board (and even they were feuding). As the strike date approached, Lamb and Sirabella held up strike preparations. They expected and predicted that HEA's imminent offer would be "a nice surprise."

The opposition groups concentrated on formulating a hard bargaining line for a decent contract, especially regarding working conditions. They spread the word of their demands to hotel workers. This was good, but alone, it was not enough. Once more, the negotiating committee members did not actively involve the rank and file. Again, there were no regular reports to the membership about what was going on behind closed doors. And of particular importance, (as subsequent events would show), the WSU did not fight for an elected strike committee. The hotel workers were once again left off to the side while action centered at the bargaining table. In the meantime, the opposition was not providing any alternative strategy.



It was time for the HEA to deliver its "nice surprise." On June 28, the hotel owners unveiled a proposed contract worse in most respects than the old one. Lamb and Sirabella were taken aback. They had counted on the HEA to offer at least modest improvements. Caught between the bosses' attacks on the one side and a militant rank and file on the other, the union leadership finally began to make serious strike preparations. As little stomach as they had for a fight, Lamb and Sirabella knew the rank and file would not take the HEA offer lying down.

On July 17, the strike finally began. Pent-up anger of the ranks burst into some of the most militant picket lines the area had seen in forty years. Aggressive strikers harassed scabs and "guests" alike. Word spread that San Francisco was a risky place for conventions and jet-set vacations. Picket line militancy rose in a crescendo to a mass demonstration on July 22 at the Hyatt Regency, where forty-five workers were arrested. This demonstration received the national newspaper and television coverage needed to chase prospective hotel clients away.

Lamb had little choice but to go along with these tactics. He could hardly buck the overwhelming sentiments of hotel workers, and was probably pretty mad at the HEA for stabbing him in the back with their last-minute hard-line ultimatum. In any event, Lamb sanctioned the militant picket lines, and called the Hyatt Regency demonstration (where he was one of the 45 arrested).

But the HEA, backed by its assembled multinational wealth, was not about to buckle. It imported scabs from up and down the coast and got an injunction limiting pickets and noise. The HEA was willing to sustain huge losses—for example, the Hyatt Regency alone reportedly lost \$763,000. Firmly backed by Mayor Diane Feinstein, the Chamber of Commerce and finance capital, the employers dug in for the selge.

But if Capital was organized and led on a war footing, labor met this unity divided and worse. Teamster Local 856 (run by Rudy Tham, recently convicted of embezzling union funds) and the Stationary Engineers were the most disgraceful. These two locals ordered members who worked at the hotels to scab on the strike.

The official leadership of the San Francisco labor movement was more discreet. The Central Labor Council's Jack Crowley, the ILWU's Jim Herman and the Teamsters' Jack Goldberger did not scab. Neither did they so much as lift a finger to aid embattled Local 2 workers. They put no pressure on the scabbing locals to honor the lines. They organized no solidarity demonstrations. Buddha-like, they posed with arms folded above the combatants. In fact, these three labor statesmen were all official mediators in the negotiations, admirably exhibiting their neutrality in class war. Their actions effectively tied labor's hands in the face of the united ruling class attack.

Despite these obstacles, mass outreach did occur. The Bay Area Rank and File Coalition, a network of militants from several unions, rallied 400 supporters and pickets to a demonstration and roving picket line on July 25. Snaking through the Union Square area, passing most of the struck hotels, the marchers bolstered the strikers' spirits. In a loud and fighting voice, the demonstrators spread the word that Bay Area workers were rallying to the side of their embattled brothers and sisters. "People at the Hilton really appreciated the first Rank and File Coalition march," said picket captain Louise Kaufmann. "They kept asking, 'When's the next march?'"

Largely because of the demonstration's success, union officials began to stir. Among them was Walter Johnson, a leftist local labor leader with a history of organizing strike support rallies embracing oppositionists and "progressive" union tops. Johnson announced an August 2 rally to be organized by his United Labor Action Coalition. Goldberger, Herman and Crowley initially supported Johnson's call, but backed off at the last minute.

The August 2 rally was a testimonial to the strike's popularity. Three thousand chanting supporters ringed Union Square hotels, growing more militant as the afternoon wore on. A confrontation with several tourist buses headed for the St. Francis Hotel seemed moments away. Precisely at this point, Walter Johnson and Charles Lamb summoned several cops and arranged to shift the demonstration across the street to Union Square Park. Within minutes, the tourists were hustled from the buses, across the now-empty sidewalks and into the St. Francis. Lamb and Johnson did not want to sell out. But neither did they want to lead the kind of fight needed for a real victory. They were, instead, desperate to compromise, long before it could produce any positive results for the strikers.

Behind closed doors, Lamb scrambled for some way to simultaneously make peace and save face. To that end, he excluded dissidents on the negotiating committee from mediation meetings. On July 26, the mediators' proposal for arbitration was eagerly snapped up by Lamb and Sirabella. A few elected rank and filers hesitated and briefly went along. HEA at first agreed to arbitration, but backed out the next day and broke off negotiations. HEA was still out for blood.

A few days after the Aug. 2 rally Walter Johnson called a United Labor Action Coalition meeting where, speaking to a hall packed with Local 2 strikers and supporters from throughout the Bay Area, Charles Lamb declared his unshaking determination to fight the struggle through to the end. Feelings ran high. Both Lamb and Johnson came under attack for doing nothing to stop scabbing by the Teamsters and Engineers. Nevertheless, a Lamb/Johnson proposal for a mass Labor March for Dignity on August 23 (expected to draw tens of thousands of workers) was overwhelmingly approved.

The meeting had scarcely adjourned before Lamb and Sirabella left for Los Angeles to join in secret talks between the International and the HEA. There, 400 miles away from the angry pickets, they took the advice of Bay Area Labor leaders Crowley, Herman (ILWU) and Goldberger (IBT), as well as International President Hanley. With picket line militancy stronger than ever, with growing support from all around the Bay, the union leadership accepted the Hotel owners pathetic offer which was little better than the HEA's pre-strike offer.

At a stormy union meeting on August 12, Lamb locked out thousands of members and started the vote even before discussion began, shouted down opponents and rammed through the L.A. agreement.

The agreement was a disaster. There is no COLA for even partial protection against inflation. There were no real changes in workloads, although this was a central demand of the militant maids section of the union. While *promises* were made to open up several racially exclusive crafts (such as waiters and waitresses in A hotels), no time limits or procedures for accomplishing this goal were



## Against the Current

mentioned. In addition, there were infringements on seniority, a weakened shop floor representation, loss of benefits, slidebacks on craft rules, and worst of all, total amnesty for scabs. In the face of the gathering economic storms, the new Hotel contract will provide only a very porous umbrella for hotel workers.

The HEA was not content with even this. After the contract vote, management reneged on their agreement to make pay and benefits retroactive to the beginning of the strike. Lamb and Sirabella squealed in pain—betrayed again. They threatened another strike, but sweet reason prevailed. The International agreed to foot the bill, shelling out several million dollars for something management uniformly finances. Local 2, the fighting heart of San Francisco labor, had seen a potential victory by and for the lowest-paid, most oppressed workers turned into a severe set-back.

### STRIKE AFTERMATH

**F**irst, it is clear that *if the strike is assessed principally from the vantage point of collective bargaining and the contract*, then one has to register the Hotel strike as a defeat for San Francisco's culinary workers. This set-back was all the more painful in that it was so "unnecessary." The strike was beginning to accrue significant active support from other unions and was viewed with increasing sympathy by working San Franciscans. Though the hotels remained open, it was clearly becoming possible to initiate partial mobilizations that *could* for periods of time challenge their ability to remain open. Demonstrations of solidarity of this kind could have in turn made the Teamster and Engineers union—whose members were crossing picket lines—reconsider their interests in this matter, hurting the HEA, and deepening the pickets' resolve. In short, at the very moment the contract was signed, new possibilities for avoiding a defeat were actually emerging. It is an exaggeration to say of the settlement that it was a case of "defeat being snatched from the jaws of victory." But it is nevertheless true that this contract demonstrates the labor leaders superb quality as alchemists—their ability to transform almost anything into fertilizer.

### A New Relation of Forces

But despite the contractual setback, if we look at the strike in less narrow, less exclusively economic terms, one can see certain developments which offer ground for optimism. For the strike revealed in a clear way the real interests and capacities of the principal forces in and around Local 2—the International, the local leadership and the organized rank and file.

As for the International, it was characteristically remote and conspiratorial. It had to be compelled to grant strike benefits to the pickets. It made no appeal to the leaderships of the Teamsters and Engineers to halt their members' crossing of picket lines. In the end, they confirmed every popular, regal image of themselves by secretly meeting in Los Angeles to end the strike behind the backs of the membership, the local rank and file negotiators, and even the Lamb-Sirabella connection.

### Sacrificial Lamb

What about the elected local leadership? The bureaucratic "team" directly responsible for running things at

the local level fared, if this is possible, even worse. The Lamb leadership has never enjoyed direct support from any of the union's principal forces. As an ex-reformer, with a personal commitment to the politics of the bureaucratic-left (community-labor alliance, strike support), he is mistrusted by the remnants of the conservative Bellardi machine that placed him in office. As an ex-reformer, he is opposed by his former allies who correctly see him as weak, untrustworthy, recently purchased, and eminently purchaseable. In periods of calm, or when there is a temporary equilibrium between left and right, he is able to mount the platform and appear as a man of vision and unity. He becomes a leader above the battle. But when these episodes give way to over-riding conflicts, he reveals his enormous weakness, and becomes something of a sacrificial Lamb for all the more rooted forces involved.

The course of the hotel strike revealed these characteristics of Lamb's leadership more clearly than ever. Thus, it would be simplistic and strategically unproductive to lump Lamb with the Belardi business agents and the International leadership. In the strike's earliest days he participated in some of the strike's most militant efforts. It led to his arrest. While this posture no doubt had its cooperative intents, it also legitimized the more militant tendencies within the ranks. Though he hesitated for more than a week in calling for solidarity activities, he finally called one of the largest demonstrations seen in San Francisco in years, and endorsed the organization of a mass march. Finally, at several points of the strike, he articulated the political line of the rank and file: praising the union's new democracy, stressing the union's anti-racism demands, stressing the strike's militancy and its need for broad labor support.

But if Lamb could at times chant, speak and fight at the head of the march, his ultimate destiny was to deliver the strike over to the pressures and compromises coming from the labor mediation team, his International bosses, and the city government. Though it appears that he had little direct role in the final negotiations, he was nevertheless forced to sell an agreement to the ranks which he had himself labeled several days earlier as "unacceptable."

### Rank and File Achievements

How did the outcome of the strike position the rank and file? A contractual defeat often signals a crisis for the rank and file (as much as for the union leadership). In this case that did not happen. The ranks of the union in no way hold the opposition responsible for the defeat. The most active and combative workers have come to at least partially understand their own strength and have enriched their consciousness as unionists, leaders and fighters. It is generally recognized that the strike was not lost so much as stolen. And this recognition has *not* bred the customary, generalized cynicism. On the contrary, it has revealed the real character of the bureaucracy and their embarrassing ineptness in the face of the HEA and the city politicians.

While a degree of post-strike depression does exist, there is little hunting for scapegoats and almost no condemnation of the rank and file organizers. And rightly so. For these oppositionists were the unquestioned heart of the strike. Their dedication is beyond doubt. Furthermore, no element among the dozens of activists evidenced any tendency to careerist adaptation to the bureaucracy. Thus, if mistakes were made, they can not be seen as



"sellouts" and should not lead to that special cynicism expressed as "they're all the same." The rank and file organizers' standing in this sense is unmistakably improved as a result of the strike and immensely stronger than Lamb or Belardi forces.

If proof is needed for these assertions it can be found in the fact that a new round of struggles has already erupted. At the very first post-strike meeting of the Local, the members present passed resolutions mandating a 48-hour period of discussion and debate after the reaching of a tentative agreement and before a final vote is taken. Perhaps more significantly, for the first time since the initial (ARF) victory, a vote to substitute *elected* for appointed business agents was carried at a membership meeting.

Ironically, if the ranks will suffer economically as a result of the strike settlement, the struggle itself has equipped them for the battles ahead and has weakened several of the HEA's secret supports. The intransigence of the HEA during the strike, which is today probably the subject of much boardroom back slapping, may tomorrow be appreciated in a somewhat less jocular light. An intransigence that produces militants and discredits capitulators is counterproductive, and has a life-span somewhat shorter than the sparrow's.

*"Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he never will come. I would not lead you out if I could, for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds that there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves."*

—Eugene Debs, 1905

## What Next?

The first condition for consolidating the ranks for the battles ahead is to prevent cynicism. As we have noted above, there is reason to feel optimistic on this score.

The second condition is that the most active workers in Local 2 and in the broader labor movement be drawn into a realistic, full and democratic evaluation of the strike. We would like to contribute our views to this process.

1) The R&F organizers were not able to break out of the strike's relative isolation. Given that one could not rely on the municipal labor leaders, the strikers found no effective way to expand the range of the strike beyond their own core. Even the 10,000 non-striking members of Local 2 were not involved in the strike.

2) To this isolation the R&F organizers added policies which inadvertently contributed to the self-isolation of the strikers. Thus, to the degree that the R&F organizers had a strategy for the strike, it was one for a war of attrition. That is, the fundamental weapon was to be a militant and aggressive picket line. They saw the picket line as the ultimate achievement of the strike, rather than as a base for transforming the combat into a mass strike. They hoped that they could ultimately wear down the giants of the industry. The picket lines would be maintained for as long as possible and the ranks' ability to resist the hardships of the strike would be translated into negotiation power through the elected negotiating committee, on

which they had a majority. This committee consequently attracted more and more of the attention of the R&F organizers. It came to be viewed as the principal force opposing a sellout agreement.

Unfortunately, with unclear power and mandates, the committee settled into the role of an opposition with a clear negative role, but with neither a positive program for conducting the strike nor any notion of how to take control of the strike out of the hands of Lamb-Sirabella. The opposition came to represent a determined and principled opposition, but not an alternative road forward.

3) The leaders of the opposition were members of the negotiations committee. Unwisely, they submitted to the ban on public debate and left the pickets effectively on the outside of events. Thus, for most of the strike they voluntarily refrained from informing the pickets and the membership of the course of the negotiations and the role being played by the various forces involved. This was all done in the name of preserving the "unity" of the strike in the face of the HEA, the city (government) and the police. It was hoped that the Lamb-Sirabella forces would share the direction of the strike with rank and file leaders if they felt safe from continuous attacks. But it should have been clear that pacts of this nature can only have value when real unity of perspective exists among the various factions leading a struggle. Decisive turning points (such as the decision to go to arbitration-mediation as a strike-ending proposal) always rend this unitary cloth and require a public airing of differences. The rank and file leaders were not prepared for this necessary shift in orientation.

4) The R&F leaders allowed the temporary unity agreement to extend to other areas of their work as well. They failed to call any meetings of the ranks to discuss the strike's organization or the evaluation of negotiations. (They even failed to maintain and mobilize the very caucuses they had been building for half a decade prior to the strike.) Yet it is through such meetings in the heat of battle that new militants are integrated, and unexpectedly vital forces emerge from the ranks.

5) Finally, there was the culminating weakness which contributed to the inability of the opposition to hold the ranks against a contract which the ranks themselves opposed. At no point did the opposition actively fight for the election of a strike committee (or at least attempt to form one during the strike). As a result, they lacked a structure through which to organize the strike, or to organize the vote or actions against the settlement. For without an alternative, open, organized leadership, a vote "No" usually seems hopeless and pointless.

The hotel strike of 1980 shows many of the possibilities for R&F initiative as well as the long distance that remains to be traveled. The strike was a partial rupture along the fault line of San Francisco's shifting political economy. For 18 days a "new" pattern of trade union action began to emerge. If in the end these militant and democratic impulses were overwhelmed by the still-dominant grip of the trade union bureaucracy, then at least the outlines of an alternative were glimpsed. The women and men of Local 2 have pushed mightily at the obstacles restraining the labor movement. One would not want to anticipate strict boundaries on their future efforts or achievements.



## Book Review



### WARTIME STRIKES<sup>1</sup>

by Martin Glaberman

*Reviewed by Frank Marquart*

**I**n the foreword of this insightful book<sup>1</sup> the author, Martin Glaberman, tells us: "Two objectives are intended in this study of strikes in the American auto industry during World War II. The first is to present the history of the struggle against the no-strike pledge in the United Auto Workers of America (UAW) and the organization of the Rank and File Caucus. The second is an analysis of the question of working class consciousness in the light of this experience."

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, shook up the American labor movement. On December 11, 1941, President Roosevelt called for a meeting of twenty-four representatives of labor and industry to reach agreement on a war labor policy that would prevent the interruption of production by labor disputes

<sup>1</sup>*Wartime Strikes*, by Martin Glaberman, Bewick/ed, Detroit, Mich. \$6.00.

*[Frank Marquart is especially qualified to review the strikes in American industry during World War II. He was a founding militant of the UAW, educational director of the famous Briggs Local 212 and Local 600 for two decades, an uncompromising, active socialist. Martin Glaberman, the author of Wartime Strikes, was also actively involved in the UAW during the events he analyzes.]*

during the period of the war. On December 15, the AFL Executive Council voted a no-strike policy in war industries. On the very next day, 100 leaders of AFL unions extended this policy to their 5 million membership. Out of Roosevelt's conference on labor and industry came the following proposals: "(1) There shall be no strikes or lockouts; (2) all disputes shall be settled by peaceful means; (3) the President shall set up a proper War Labor Board to handle these disputes."

The labor leaders obediently accepted the President's proposal and agreed to serve on the War Labor Board. Not one union bothered to consult the membership in advance, and very few bothered to consult afterward. One of the unions that did consult the membership was the UAW, and the manner in which the membership was "consulted" would make a good case study of bureaucratic manipulation. I lived through the experiences described by Glaberman in the first chapter of this book, for at that time I served as education director of UAW Ford Local 600.

The UAW Executive Board called a conference to be held April 7 and 8, 1942, to act on the program that the Defense Employment Committee of the UAW-CIO was advocating. The delegates to the conference were to be selected, not elected, and they were not permitted to study the program in advance of the conference.



The program presented at the conference was called "Victory Through Equality of Sacrifice." It called for giving up the right to strike, for surrendering premium overtime pay for Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays as such. In return for this sacrifice on the part of labor, the government would take steps to prevent inflation, to prohibit war profiteering, and to place a \$25,000 ceiling on salaries.

I attended the conference as an observer and I saw how apprehensive the delegates were over giving up the right to strike. I can still hear Art Shipley, a delegate from Dodge Local 3, shouting in an agitated tone: "If we accept this no-strike pledge, then collective bargaining at the shop level will become collective begging!" And John Magill, a delegate from the Flint, Michigan, Buick Local, said in an oral history interview: "This was our first no-strike pledge. It was not written into the contracts at that time, but I predicted and a lot of other guys predicted at that time that any time we ever gave up the right to strike, it would eventually be written into our contracts and the GM contract bears this out.... The only effective weapon the worker has and we gave this up."

I remember the steamroller tactics used by the leadership to get the so-called Equality of Sacrifice program adopted. A time limit was placed on speeches by rank and file delegates but no such limit applied to the officers. Every time a delegate spoke in opposition to the program, an officer would take unlimited time to defend the program. Every speech by an officer was couched in fervid patriotic tones: "Our country is at war! We must all sacrifice!" At the psychological moment before the vote was taken, a telegram that President Roosevelt had sent to the conference was read a second time and a UAW vice president shouted: "Are you going to tell the President of the United States to go to hell?" The program giving up overtime pay was adopted, with 150 delegates voting in the opposition.

The UAW paid a price for relinquishing overtime pay. Glaberman tells us that in a series of 1942 NLRB elections, the International Association of Machinists, AFL, decisively defeated the UAW on the overtime issue. In this connection Glaberman makes a significant observation concerning the difference between the AFL and the CIO when those two houses of labor were divided: It was widely believed in labor and liberal circles that the AFL was a conservative federation committed to "business unionism" while the CIO, especially the UAW, was a progressive federation committed to "social unionism." In fact the UAW is still considered to be the American model of social unionism. Glaberman tells us what this means.

The concerns of union leaders (especially such as Walter P. Reuther) who went beyond the traditional bread and butter unionism of the AFL to deal with general social questions have often been misunderstood as a sign of greater militancy. More often, it was simply a tendency to move the labor movement in the direction of incorporation into the structure of the "welfare" state. Social unionism represented the demands of the state for the social control of the workers at least as much as it represented the generalized interests of the membership of the unions.

In the formative days of the UAW the auto workers were nothing if not militant. It was by their militancy that they were able to bring General Motors, the largest industrial corporation in the world, to its knees and force management to bargain with the union. If militancy was a bane to management, it was also a bane to the union leadership. And Glaberman tells how the bureaucrats set about to tame the union, to constrain militancy, to hold the ranks in check at the shop level. This was achieved by contract unionism, by inserting no-strike clauses in the contract. Reinforcing those no-strike clauses were provisions in the UAW constitution which vested the right to authorize strikes in the International Executive Board. If, for example, the membership of a UAW local voted overwhelmingly for strike action, such action could not be taken unless and until the International Executive Board gave its approval. Without such approval, any strike would be dubbed a wildcat and therefore illegal. When Walter Reuther was director of the UAW General Motors Division, he lost no time seeing to it that a no-strike provision was included in the GM contract.

The UAW leadership's determination to discipline its own ranks was further expressed in the changed role of UAW shop stewards. In the early days of the union, before contract unionism became institutionalized, the shop steward had power at the shop level. If supervision in a department refused to settle a major grievance, the steward could, and often did, tell the aggrieved workers to stop working until supervision corrected the problem. But when the no-strike clause made such action illegal, the steward lost power. Stewards became mere referral agents; they could refer cases to the supervisor but they could no longer exert pressure on him. Consequently, aggrieved workers had no choice but to defy union rules and "walk off the job."

How the UAW leaders dealt with these wartime strikes (and other wildcats in later years) is exemplified by the conduct of Leonard Woodcock, UAW president from 1970-76. At that time, 1943, Woodcock was a UAW international representative. Here is how he himself described his collaboration with the corporation president in strikebreaking:

I remember at the Continental plant we had a lot of stoppages and I used to spend a great deal of my time going down there and putting men back to work. But finally one day (this must have been around '43 I guess) the plant was down and I was sitting in with the committee and the management. Jack Reese was then president of the Continental Corporation, as he still is, and he finally said to me: "Well, what would you do about it?" I said, "Well, I am not going to answer that question, but I will tell you this, if I were in your place I would say to this union, 'This plant stays down until the union comes to its senses.' He looked at me and then he said, 'All right, this plant is down.' So we had a membership meeting and we just said that this sort of thing was intolerable and it is undemocratic and improper. We got a motion passed overwhelmingly that anybody who did this sort of thing was on his own. We did not have another wildcat strike in that plant for at least 18 months.

Despite the UAW leadership's efforts, the no-strike pledge could not stop the succession of strikes that occurred in 1943-44. Coinciding with the miners' strikes



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of 1943 were a number of strikes in auto, including strikes in five Chrysler plants. Opposition to the pledge was expressed by two resolutions introduced at the 1943 convention. But the leadership was able to sway the delegates and the pledge was retained.

That decision, however, put an end to nothing. For in February of 1944, over 6,000 workers at the GM Gear and Axle plant struck. In that same month another 6,000 struck at Ford's Highland Park plant, and were denounced by UAW leaders for their wildcat. Wildcats in March caused UAW president Thomas to urge discriminatory action against the strikers. Over 100 workers were disciplined by the Ford Motor Company for strike action.

At the Michigan State CIO convention, opponents of the no-strike pledge joined ranks and prepared to do battle. But the CIO leaders were prepared. A massive army of CIO and UAW top officers poured it on the Michigan delegates hour after hour in denunciation of any attempts to abrogate the pledge. They were joined by the Army and Navy brass hats, clergymen and especially selected Purple Heart war veterans. The pledge was sustained by two-thirds of the delegates.

But at the 1944 UAW convention the no-strike pledge really touched off a storm. *Labor Action* reported: "So unpopular is the pledge that all the opportunist office seekers of Local 400 are rushing to jump on the bandwagon to scrap the no-strike pledge, including several who only one month ago were its firm upholders...."

The opponents of the pledge marshalled their forces and planned to do battle at the forthcoming UAW convention. They formed a rank and file committee or caucus and drew up a three-point program: (1) Rescind the no-strike pledge; (2) for independent political action; (3) remove the brass hats from the International leadership and substitute for them officers who represent the rank and file. Prominent in the caucus were socialists, Trotskyists, IWW members and rank and file militants. The rank and file caucus planned the strategy for the fight against the no-strike pledge. Three resolutions on the pledge came before the convention—a majority, a minority and a super-minority resolution. The majority resolution reflected the CP line as well as that of the AFL and CIO hierarchy. It called for continuing the pledge. The key resolve clause stated: "For the duration of the war the UAW-CIO reaffirms its no-strike pledge to the Commander-in-Chief of our armed forces and to our country."

The minority resolution reflected the views of the Reuther brothers; it agreed with the majority resolution in providing that the no-strike pledge be upheld "in those plants wholly or partially engaged in war production." The resolution differed from the majority resolution by providing that "in those plants reconverted to the exclusive and sole manufacture of civilian production the pledge of labor not to strike shall not be binding."

The super-minority resolution was introduced by Ben Garrison of Ford Local 400. The following resolve clause shows how basically this resolution differed from the other two: "That we assembled in this great convention rescind our no-strike pledge and that a referendum vote of the membership be conducted by the International Executive Board after adjournment of the convention to either uphold or reject the action of the convention."

A heated debate followed the introduction of these three resolutions. At that time I served as education director of Briggs Local 212 and it did my heart good when the delegates from that local responded to mushy patriotic appeals of the leadership by whipping out small American flags and waving them widely in derision. The *super-minority* resolution was defeated. But the vote opposing Reuther's minority resolution "was so overwhelming that there was not even a request for a roll call vote. It was Reuther's low point in the UAW," says Glaberman. But to the astonishment of the leadership, their motion reaffirming the pledge also lost! The big shots on the platform were stunned. Honorary guests and dignitaries from the government and the CIO saw that the UAW leadership was unable to deliver its own membership. More disconcerting to the UAW brass was that now the union no longer had a no-strike pledge. To say that the leadership was taken by surprise would be an understatement.

The Resolutions Committee brought back revamped resolutions and the one adopted contained this clause: "That this convention authorize a referendum vote of the entire membership commencing 90 days after the adjournment of this convention and that a committee of nine be appointed by the convention to conduct a referendum vote throughout the United States." This resolution was adopted.

When the convention ended, the rank and file caucus planned a campaign on the referendum. The caucus elected a steering committee and voted to publish a paper (*The Rank and Filer*) directed against the pledge. Appearing in each issue of the paper was the nine-point program which the caucus drew up at the convention. The program called for everything from rescinding the no-strike pledge to demanding a thirty-hour week at a livable wage and to electing UAW officers who support the program of workers in the shop. Clearly the caucus members were determined to carry on beyond the referendum and strive for power in the UAW structure.

The vote on the referendum occurred in February 1945. In the days preceding the balloting loud arguments could be heard in the shops, in union halls and in beer gardens. The ballot count showed that the no-strike pledge was upheld by a substantial majority.

But it is not at all clear that that was the real voice of the UAW ranks. "A majority of the auto workers who voted, voted to retain the no-strike pledge while the country was at war. However the overwhelming majority of auto workers did not bother to vote. At the same time, in the period that the vote was taking place, in the winter and spring of 1944-45, a majority of auto workers went out on wildcat strikes," writes Glaberman. *Business Week* reported that the votes were being counted at the very time when there were more workers on strike in Detroit than at any time since the start of the war. It should be emphasized that those strikes occurred at a time when "a referendum was indicating a two-to-one opposition to wartime strikes."

## ROLE OF THE LEFT

Heavily involved and influential in the struggle against the no-strike pledge were parties of the left—the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Workers Party (WP), and the Socialist Party (SP). I was a member of the Socialist Party during the war years and I know that the



SP played a minor role. When members of the SP became active in the union, they soon behaved like traditional trade unionists and dropped out of the party. As for the Communist Party, it was an ardent supporter of the pledge.

During the Stalin-Hitler pact days and before Hitler invaded Russia in 1941, the CP members denounced the Second World War as an imperialist bloodbath. But no sooner did Hitler doublecross Stalin and invade Russia, then the CP line changed overnight. World War II then became a "people's war against Fascism" and Russia was hailed as "our great Soviet Ally."

The CP did more than support the no-strike pledge. It accepted infringements on civil liberties and on the rights of workers. It denounced opposition in the labor movement as Trotskyites, spies, traitors and saboteurs. The reactionary role of the CP cost the party dearly. When the Cold War set in and top-ranking labor leaders directed a campaign to eliminate CP influence in the UAW and drive out CP competitors for union posts—"there were practically no members ready to stand up for the democratic rights of CP-ers in the union."

Unlike the CP, the SWP stood fast in proclaiming that the war was an imperialist struggle on both sides, and criticized labor leaders for supporting the war and for giving up labor's rights. Curiously the SWP's wartime policy contained some ambiguities. It denounced the war as imperialist on *two* sides (U.S. and Great Britain vs. Germany). But at the same time it called for defense of the Soviet Union, and for shipment of war materials to Russia on the ground that the U.S.S.R. is a degenerated workers state with a nationalized economy and therefore needs defending.

Unlike the SWP, the Workers Party took a forthright stand against all sides on the war: "Against the imperialist war of Berlin-Rome-Tokyo! Against the imperialist war camp of Washington, Moscow." WP literature called for support of the "Third Camp"—the "camp of the suffering peoples, the camp of the exploited workers of all lands, of the disinherited and oppressed masses, of the colonies!"

But the two Trotskyist wings (Cannon's SWP and Shachtman's WP) operating in the union had one thing in common—they were both elitists. They valued union posts and influence with union leaders more than they valued influence with the rank and file.

This was especially true of the Workers Party. Over the years, the WP became increasingly paranoid in its hatred of the CP, and came to see the Communists as the main enemy. Ultimately they found the McGovern wing of the Democratic Party too soft on Communism and preferred the Johnson-Humphrey-Jackson wing. Today many former WPers are active in Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, which operates in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

## UMW AND MESA

If the parties on the left played a part in influencing auto workers to strike in wartime, the United Mine Workers of America and the Mechanics Educational Society of America (MESA) exerted an even greater influence.

Predating the UAW, the MESA started out as a union of skilled tradesmen and in 1933 conducted a strike in-

volving some 5,000 mechanics in various tool shops in Detroit. The MESA was a training ground for many workers who later became leaders in the 1937 sitdown strikes. When the UAW began to organize, leftists, especially communists, switched to the UAW, so they could "be in the mainstream of the American labor movement." In order to survive, the MESA extended its organizing activities to include production workers, although the bulk of the membership continued to be skilled workers.

Unlike the UAW, where power is centered in the hands of the top officers and the Executive Board, the MESA had a far more democratic structure. Yet, from the time he played the leading part in organizing the union during the years when he was its executive secretary, the late Matt Smith dominated the organization by the sheer force of his personality. During his MESA career Smith had to battle on several fronts. He defeated the attempts of the communists to take over his union; he feuded with the UAW, which sought to raid his membership; he was a formidable negotiator and won spectacular concessions from management at the bargaining table. And during the war he "took on" the government. In all of those conflicts his opponents came out second best. Smith was opposed to a no-strike pledge during wartime—or any time. He insisted that any time a group of workers in a shop department had a grievance which management refused to settle, then those workers should strike on the spot. This kind of thinking was anathema to the UAW leadership. When he conducted strikes during the war, Detroit daily newspapers carried front page editorials denouncing him as a foreigner (he was British) who instigated strikes against the government of the United States. Smith's testimony before a Senate subcommittee investigating production in Detroit reads like exciting dialogue in a good novel. Here are a few excerpts:

**Sen. Ferguson:** Did you organize the MESA?

**Smith:** I wouldn't say that.

**Sen. Ferguson:** Who really was the organizer?

**Smith:** Some very unscrupulous employers in the area must be given credit for organizing our union. Any place you cannot organize, you must be patient and allow the boss to do it for you. He's usually tempted to do just that.

**Sen. Ferguson:** Has your organization signed the no-strike pledge?

**Smith:** Oh my goodness no. We would not and we don't intend to refrain from striking, as we have not as yet met any employers that are worthy of being given that pledge. I am afraid they might be tempted to touch some of our members and discriminate against them, and if they ever do that the full weight of our organization will be used, peacetime, wartime, in and out of season to protect our membership.

**Sen. Ferguson:** No matter what happens with the country, your membership comes first?

**Smith:** Listen, Senator, I come from a country (England) that had 91 wars in 100 years. I am getting a bit cynical about them. I know we have always been right, but just expect me to be just slightly disillusioned.

**Sen. Ferguson:** Do you get in the plants?

**Smith:** At the beginning, of course, we had some difficulty, but if we couldn't get in the plants, I brought the boys out of the plant to talk with me and then after that I was allowed in the plant.



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During the testimony Smith firmly declared that he was a socialist. How unlike Walter Reuther, who in a TV interview publicly repudiated his socialist past as a temporary episode of youthful naivete.

The MESA did not hesitate to strike over a discriminatory government ruling. Smith's union struck 30 plants in 1944 when the National Labor Relations Board permitted the UAW to hold an election at a Willys tool room in Toledo, where the MESA had bargaining rights. Smith charged that the NLRB favored the CIO. MESA struck and won.

### **MINERS REJECT THE PLEDGE**

The story of the wartime strikes in the coal mines, wildcat as well as official, is well-known. They began with widespread wildcats in 1943, which, unlike the UAW, were not condemned by the UMW leadership. Indeed, on May 1, 1943, all soft coal mines were shut down by the union. Roosevelt seized the mines. The miners defied him. Eventually the coal operators and the government gave in to the union's demands—a \$2 per day increase and the famous portal-to-portal pay clause.

Glaberman sums up the significance of this protracted miner's struggle as follows:

The ability and willingness of the miners to take on the government in a series of battles and to emerge with a significant victory was evident to every one in the country, not least of all to the auto workers. It was not that this convinced auto workers that the no-strike pledge was false policy. It confirmed what was a widespread sentiment to begin with. The obvious dual class standard of the government in the rigidity of wage controls as opposed to the "flexibility" of price controls was simply brought out into the open by the miners' strikes... it lent legitimacy and strength to those who opposed the no-strike pledge. It also undermined the power and prestige of the UAW leadership as a result of their openly taking sides with those who were attacking the miners.

From the lessons of the wartime strikes Glaberman draws conclusions that must make traditional social democrats fume. His conclusions amount to a veritable dissertation on contradiction as a dialectical process. He examines why workers behave the way they do and what this portends for the future. He disagrees with those leftists and liberals who believe that workers who refused to vote in the referendum were backward. He contends that to those workers the outcome of the referendum did not matter one way or another. And it did not matter because to most workers the union structure is seen as an alien force. I can verify this. Many times I asked UAW members why they did not attend union meetings. The reply can be summed up like this:

"Why should I waste my time? The porkchoppers have everything sewed up—those union meetings don't mean a damn thing to us guys in the shop." Workers hold a similar attitude toward the state, local and national elections. I often heard UAW International representatives complain that many workers don't take the trouble to vote on election day. UAW leaders are wrong when they say such workers are "backward." "Union leaders, politicians, intellectuals are seen as 'them' as opposed to 'us,'" says Glaberman. He believes that workers who reject the institutional framework and take action outside of that framework are expressing a revolutionary potential. He quotes this passage from Marx and Engels:

The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is *what* the proletariat *is*, and what, consequent on that *being*, it will be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is irrevocably and obviously demonstrated in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today."

The ruling class can control the flow of ideas through educational institutions and the mass media but the way workers have to live is in contradiction to those ideas. Glaberman reminds us that it is the contradiction between being and consciousness which produces change. "The hostile and alienating nature of work in this society (in addition to all the institutions inside and outside the factory designed to sustain the discipline of work) forces workers to resist their daily reality, individually and collectively."

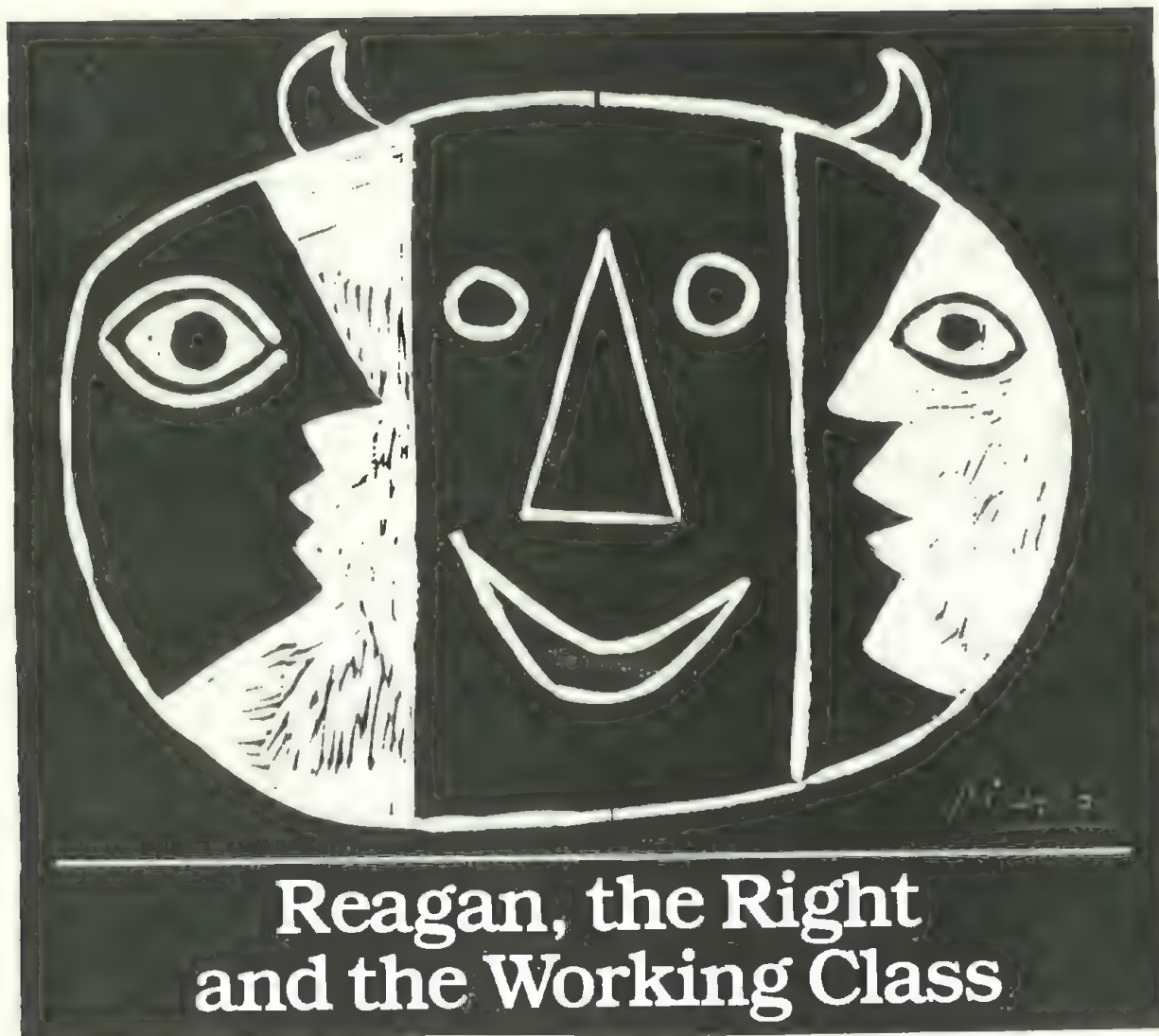
Glaberman ends his book by relating the wartime strikes to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the French revolt of 1968. (Today he would include the Polish general strikes of 1980.) What began as student demonstrations soon evolved into working class revolt on a mass scale. Prior to those upheavals, there was nothing in the behavior of the Hungarian and French masses to foreshadow the coming storm.

How to explain those revolutions, which led to a network of workers councils in Hungary and to the near collapse of the DeGaulle government in France?

"They indicate, it seems to me, a fundamental class solidarity and a huge hidden reserve of consciousness and activity which can produce similar spontaneous outbursts on a vast social scale in the United States," Glaberman writes. In saying this he is not making a prediction that these events *will* occur; he believes that those who are concerned with fundamental social change "...would do better to base themselves on working class revolutionary potential than on the limited empirical evidence of the day-to-day."

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## Reagan, the Right and the Working Class

By JOHANNA BRENNER AND ROBERT BRENNER

**T**he results of the recent election reflect a general drift to the right in American politics. No doubt the core of the organized right, at every level is recruited from the middle and lower-middle classes as well as from the capitalist class proper. But over the past decade, right-wing political alternatives have won increasing support in the working class as well. To deny the existence of this trend is to put one's head in the sand.

Nonetheless, the election results hardly merit the panic with which they have been greeted by some sections of the left. Fascism is not on the agenda. Nor can the election results possibly justify the conclusion, already reached by many leftists, that we should now rally our forces behind left-talking liberals, self-styled social democrats, or "progressive" trade union officials and community leaders.

There has, as yet, been little hardening around right-wing political positions. The election results show, above all, that people are ambivalent and confused, uncertain and changeable. Thus, it is not so much the political outlook of the American people *at this moment* that is worrisome. But what the election results tell us about the overall trend *is* cause for concern.

There are some who doubt a drift to the right in so far as it applies to the working class. After all, workers are pro-

foundly disillusioned with American politics and institutions. Everything is suspect, from the unions to the ability of the Establishment to solve the problems of American society. The most dramatic evidence of this disillusionment is the steadily increasing abstention from elections. On the face of it, this would seem to augur an opening to the left, and for a small minority, that may have happened. Yet cynicism by itself is just as likely to provide ground for an individualistic, nihilistic view as it is for a class-conscious world view. This is especially so in the U.S., given the huge gulf between the working class and any residual radical tradition—a gulf which is greater today than at any extended period in the 20th century. Moreover, the overriding development which needs to be confronted is that since the early '70's, *in the absence of any significant working class mobilization*, real material forces have been at work to push large numbers of working people, toward the right. Workers have moved right instead of left because of what they *perceive* to be—and what in a limited but important sense really are—their immediate, short-run economic interests (however disastrous this may be in the long-run). It is this development which makes the politics and organization of the right a serious threat.



# Against the Current

## I. THE ELECTION RESULTS

Forty seven per cent of all blue collar voters supported Reagan; 44% of those from labor union households backed him. These figures cannot be brushed aside. Reagan was well-known to be a candidate from the far right of the political spectrum. The Republican Convention which nominated him gave its overwhelming support to the extreme right wing of the Republican Party, while millions watched on TV. Despite Reagan's attempts to appear as a moderate during the campaign, most voters who supported him had to be aware of what they were voting for—or be willfully blind, which also says something about their politics.

Indeed, polls taken at the time of the election and since have registered an overwhelming sentiment in favor of building up American military power and of a more aggressive foreign policy, and against welfare and affirmative action. There can be no denying the right wing trend. After all, the last candidate who ran with an orientation similar to Reagan's—Barry Goldwater in 1964—was buried beneath one of the greatest landslides in American history.

On the other hand, as has been widely remarked, the voter turnout was the lowest since 1948. Only 52% of those eligible voted. A large majority of those who didn't vote opposed Reagan. According to the polls, if all those eligible to vote had cast their ballots, Reagan would have lost. Moreover, close to 40% of those who voted for Reagan, did so apparently as a protest against Carter and his politics ("It's time for a change") and not out of ideological conviction. Finally, according to the polls, only a relatively small percentage of those working people who voted for Reagan supported the full program of the right. They were, they said, protesting inflation and opting for a tax cut. But they are not in favor of dismantling state services. While voting for Reagan, they continue to want nationalized health, government regulation of occupational health and safety, environmental protection, restriction of government contracts to firms hiring unionized workers, etc.

Nonetheless, when all is said and done, many workers who want traditional liberal social programs still supported Reagan even knowing that he opposes these programs. In settling for Reagan, they were, for the moment at least, giving up the hope of getting what they really want. They have forsaken traditional liberalism not so much because it is theoretically undesirable, but because it no longer offers a realistic approach to protecting their own interests. They have drifted to the right because it appears the only way to defend themselves.

## II. THE MATERIAL BASIS OF THE DRIFT TO THE RIGHT

The election results are ambiguous and contradictory. But it would be foolish to ignore the powerful logic leading significant sections of the working class to support right wing political positions. This logic has asserted itself ever more powerfully during the '70's as the working class has reeled under a vicious employers' offensive.

### The Capitalist Offensive

The period since the late '60's has witnessed a severe economic crisis. Above all, profit rates have fallen from

10% to 5.4% between 1965 and 1972. They never really recovered during the '70's. To recoup, the capitalist class unleashed an attack against working people. Real wages, especially for the unorganized majority, have been cut; speed-up, lack of safety and other declining conditions have become a fact of life at work. In addition, the quality of life: of social services, of the cities, of the natural environment has decayed.

The working class has not been passive under these assaults. But after an initial militant outburst in the early '70's, resistance has been sporadic, routinely de-railed by the trade union officials, and generally ineffective. *It was this inability of working people to defend their position through collective action against the employers, which led sections of the working class to seek other solutions.* The economic pie is shrinking. The employers appear too strong to confront directly. Moreover, to attack the employers' profits seems counter-productive, for there is an obvious crisis of investment and productivity across wide areas of the American economy and clearly more investment is needed. The all-too-evident flight of capital only hammers this point home. Working class people feel powerless, hostage to the needs of capital accumulation and profit.

In this situation it is understandable, though not defensible, that sections of the working class should try to protect themselves at the expense of the weaker sections. This is the main source of the drift to the right in the working class. The process is not always conscious. But insofar as people are really unable to act as a class and are not taking on the capitalists, they are unlikely to adopt a class struggle world view to solve their problems. There is then every temptation to see society as made up not of two classes in opposition but of *individuals* competing on the market. This outlook does correspond to one aspect of capitalist reality: for workers are not only *collective producers* with a common interest in taking collective control over social production. They are also *individual sellers of labor power* in conflict with each other over jobs, promotions, etc. This individualistic point of view has a critical advantage in the current period: in the absence of class against class organization, it *seems* to provide an alternative strategy for effective action—a sectionalist strategy which pits one layer of workers against another.

It appears possible for the stronger sections of the working class to defend their positions by organizing on the basis of already existing ties against weaker, less-organized sections. They can take advantage of their position as Americans over and against foreigners, as whites over and against blacks, as men over and against women, as employed over and against unemployed, etc. In so doing, working people may act initially only out of what they perceive to be their most immediate self-interest. But over time they inevitably feel the pressure to make sense of these actions and they adopt ideas which can make their actions reasonable and coherent. These ideas are, of course, the ideas of the right.

Attempts by stronger sections of the working class to defend their positions at the expense of weaker sections are bound to prove counterproductive. Workers who use such strategies inevitably ally themselves, implicitly or explicitly, with the capitalist class, or a section of it. In so doing they only deepen already existing antagonisms within the working class, making it more difficult for every section of the working class to organize on the basis



of common class interests. In the long run, sectionalist strategies are a dead end. But in the short run they appear reasonable. Therefore, to explain workers' attraction to right wing politics as merely an expression of false consciousness—that is, as something imposed by the capitalist class on the working class through the media, the schools, etc.—misses a critical point. These politics express, in however distorted a fashion, real material interests—interests which must be understood, if the right is to be effectively combatted. The destructive consequences of the sectionalist strategies to defend these interests are revealed in the rise of racism, sexism, and national chauvinism within the working class.

### **The Tax Revolt, Affirmative Action, Busing, and The Rise of Racism**

Between 1972 and 1979, *average* spendable weekly earnings (for a family of 4) declined by 9%. Meanwhile the burden of taxation has increased. The weight of property taxes has become unbearable in some states. In 1977, for example, property taxes took 7.6% of personal income in Massachusetts, 6.5% in California, compared to 4.6% for the U.S. as a whole.

The growing squeeze on working people, caught between stagnant or declining real wages and rising taxes, forms the background for the tax revolt. Cutting taxes is an entirely understandable response to a real problem. And working people have been quite discriminating in their support of tax cut proposals. They have backed anti-tax programs mainly where the burden has become most unupportable. Thus, Proposition 13 in California and Proposition 2½ in Massachusetts won property tax relief. But tax reduction proposals were *defeated* over the recent period in Michigan, Oregon, Nebraska, Nevada, South Dakota, Utah and Arizona. In these states property tax rates had already been about 30% less (as a proportion of per capita income) than they were in Massachusetts or California. In California, in the wake of Proposition 13, voters turned down a proposal to cut income taxes—primarily because state income taxes take such a small proportion of most families' incomes, especially now that the income tax structure is fully indexed for inflation.

Still, tax cuts do not benefit everyone equally, nor is their impact on government equally felt. Tax reform propositions have hurt, above all, the worse-off sections of the working class. They have come at the expense in particular of public workers. At the same time, they have hit recipients of welfare and job-creating programs (like CETA). Overwhelmingly, cuts fall most heavily on blacks, Latinos, and other oppressed minorities; for they are heavily concentrated in public sector employment and they are to a disproportionate degree the beneficiaries of government programs to help the poor (since they are disproportionately among the poor). The effect of the tax revolt—within the working class—is to help the better off sectors at the expense of the worse-off, and to help whites at the expense of the oppressed minorities.

Similar dynamics are at work around the issues of affirmative action and busing. During the '60's and early '70's, blacks and other oppressed sections of the working class won important gains. Among these were better access to higher education through scholarships and quotas, to jobs through preferential hiring and promotion policies. These and other advances quite probably represented to some extent a re-distribution of benefits within the work-

ing class, from the better-off to the worse-off, rather than a re-distribution from the capitalists to the working class. For example, the employers are not hurt by preferential hiring at a construction site, or busing (because *their* children go to *private* schools). But in any event these gains for Blacks and women were made possible by the spectacular economic growth of that earlier period in which *everyone* gained. More jobs were available, increasing funds could be devoted to services of all kinds. Thus, for the poor to gain even proportionately did not prevent the better-off sections of the working class from gaining absolutely as they too experienced improvements in their living standard.

Today, of course, the opposite is true. Jobs are scarce, good jobs even more so. Services are in decline. Unable to get more from the capitalists, the better-off sections of the working class have responded in a predictable fashion. They are attempting to recover the position they have "lost." The attack on affirmative action is widespread. The fight against busing has the overwhelming support of white working class communities. Both busing and affirmative action arise as issues because whites see their problems at least in part as resulting from the gains made by blacks. The busing question is naturally very complex: many people may oppose busing because they want their children to go to neighborhood schools. But one source of the struggle against busing is undoubtedly opposition to its tendency to equalize educational opportunity. It is not that whites necessarily object to special opportunity, *but in a period of education cutbacks*, equalization can only be a levelling process which comes at the expense of white workers' children.

The struggles to lower taxes and cut government spending, to limit affirmative action and stop busing have tended to be accompanied and justified, sooner or later, by the adoption of right wing ideas. "Cut waste" and "get rid of welfare cheaters" are widely supported slogans. They represent scarcely veiled attacks on Blacks. Unable to fight off the capitalist assault, even the formerly progressive, unionized, sections of the working class have been open to these ideas. As Glen Watts, liberal president of the Communications Workers union recently remarked, "When I speak to our members, people are always asking me, 'Why do we pay so much taxes to take care of those deadbeats?'"

It is in the context of the material opposition between white and black workers, given that the working class has so far failed to counter the employers' offensive, that we should understand the alarming revival of racist sentiment. While for many years it was socially unacceptable to express openly racist opinions, such opinions are, today, beginning to be tolerated. This heightening of racism within the broader population forms the background to the alarming rise of the Klan and the outbreak of racist killings. There is, of course, no more direct line to the politics of the right than through racism.

### **Growing National Chauvinism**

Just as racist ideas emerge from the immediate conflict between better-off and worse-off workers, so does super-patriotism emerge from a strategy for survival which unites U.S. workers against workers in other countries. The most obvious stage for this conflict between the workers of different nations is the struggle for cheaper oil. The rising cost of fuel leads to higher prices and lower stan-



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dards of living. One solution to the high cost of fuel is to prevent the oil companies from passing on the higher price of crude oil. This solution requires an attack on the profits of the oil-producing capitalists and seems to be out of the question, given their enormous power. So U.S. workers' opposition is directed instead against other nations, especially in the Middle East, who have stolen "our" oil and held the American people up for ransom.

In a similar way, Americans are being pitted against foreign workers over jobs. They blame runaway shops, rising unemployment, and lower wages on the workers of other countries who are paid less, and on the immigrants driven into the U.S. seeking jobs by the poverty of their own countries. The demand for protectionism is one tactic for securing jobs for American workers *in the short run*. But high tariffs on Japanese cars and steel make Japan's more efficiently-produced and otherwise cheaper products as expensive as domestically-produced goods thus raising the U.S. cost of living. The demand for ceilings on immigration and for stricter patrols of the borders, aims to protect wages by limiting the labor supply. Organizing the unorganized is a far better way to maintain wages, but that seems to most workers to be a hopeless strategy at the moment.

Of course the real source of the trouble is not "cheap" imports, but the fact that many of the U.S. corporations are losing their ability to compete because they are not producing efficiently. Moreover, the deepening world-wide economic crisis has led to shrinking markets. The competition between U.S.-based industry and foreign-based production has therefore intensified. One apparent way out is to compensate for the weakness of the U.S. economy by reasserting U.S. military muscle. This policy *appears* to many workers to offer an alternative to declining jobs and real wages. Indeed it is the only "realistic" alternative *once class struggle at home appears as a dead end*.

High tariffs, immigration controls, and a "firm" bargaining stance against OPEC form the "rational kernel" for a nationalistic world outlook that is taking on an increasingly irrational and potentially explosive character. The vicious, racist hysteria around the Iranian students of the past year was perhaps a preview of what might emerge on a broader scale in the future. The sense widely shared within the American working class, that the U.S. is on the defensive in the world is leading to the re-emergence of a militarist, anti-communist consensus. Through the late '60's and early '70's, it appeared that the cold war ideology had been definitively exploded by the Vietnam War. But today support for a hard line foreign policy is widespread. This is expressed not only in the demand to balance the "human rights" policy with even more backing for oppressive anti-communist regimes, but also in rising sentiment against the Soviet Union. In 1972, 49% of Americans were concerned about keeping our military defenses strong; in February 1980, a staggering 78%. In 1974, only 33% wanted the U.S. to play a more important role as a world leader; in February 1980, the figure had jumped to 57%. Polls taken at the November election found that more than half of the voters agreed that the U.S. should be more forceful in dealing with the Soviet Union, even if it would increase the risk of war.

### Pro-Family Ideology

Racism and national chauvinism are two keystones for the right wing world view. The third is the anti-feminist,

anti-gay, "pro-family" ideology of the new right. The most ideologically powerful and compelling aspects of the new right—expressed in the so-called Right to Life Movement and in the anti-gay movements such as Save Our Children—do not at first sight connect so directly to the deepening economic crisis and the intensified struggle for survival. Nonetheless, insofar as anti-abortion and anti-gay ideas are sources of a political mobilization which recruits from within the working class, they do reflect the employers' offensive, just as surely as the rise of racism and national chauvinism. The link is through the defense of the nuclear family.

The family, with all its weaknesses, is one of the few places in capitalist society where it seems possible for people to have non-competitive, inter-dependent, relatively supportive relationships. Family members are not competing with each other on the market—fighting to get the best deal for themselves—but trying to make a go of it together. As the economic crisis gets worse, and when working class collective action against the capitalists is not rapidly developing, competition between workers intensifies. The world "outside" the family becomes, more and more, a "war of each against all." In this situation the family appears as a refuge. Here at least there is some support, some trust. Here everyone has to work together, because they depend on each other. Here, it seems, there is a type of solidarity which counteracts the individualism and competitiveness so rampant in capitalist society.

Of course, the family cannot actually fulfill this ideal. Yet, lacking other alternatives people are forced to rely upon it. Even so, just as the crisis is increasing people's need for the family, it is also undermining the family. Families are breaking up—and breaking down—under the economic pressure. To maintain family incomes, men have increased their work hours and women have gone out to work. More than half of all married women are now working. Women, especially, are robbed of their leisure time coping with double burden of housework and child-care along with full time wage work. With their emotional and physical resources stretched to the bone, it is hardly shocking that men and women find it difficult to maintain their relationships—or to provide the caring that each hopes to get out of family life.

It is this desperate need for solidarity and support, ideally but not really provided by the family, which more than anything else seems to be the well-spring for the increasing opposition to the women's and gay movements. Neither the gay movement nor the pro-abortion movement defines itself as attacking the family. Nevertheless, both challenge the nuclear family. For they deny that either men or women must accept the adult sex roles defined by the nuclear family. The very assertion that women have the "right to choose" (especially to choose not to have children), and that gay people's sexual preference may represent a positive alternative to heterosexuality, in themselves raise questions about the "natural" and inevitable character of traditional family roles and structures.

Now it is true that fear about the loss of the family is not the only source of an anti-gay, anti-women politics. Men do have a vested interest in the maintenance of traditional roles, for the family is organized to assure male dominance. Control over women's sexuality and their reproductive capacities is one of the key elements in the patriarchal



relationship which governs family arrangements. Moreover, some women resist the feminist movement because they feel that to reject women's traditional role means that they reject those nurturing qualities—particularly their special role in childbearing and childrearing—which have been the only source of self-worth and value allowed to many women.

But these sources of support for an anti-feminist, anti-gay politics have always existed. And despite them, the women's movement and gay movement of the late '60's and early '70's created an atmosphere in which many people, including working people, responded positively or were willing to tolerate these movements. Whatever opposition may have existed, there was little political mobilization around a "pro-family" program.

Only a few years later, the tables are turned. The women and gay movements are losing ground, while significant numbers of people are rising to "defend the family." This turnaround can't be understood unless we see its connection to the intensification of the economic crisis over the last decade and the atomizing pressure of that crisis on the working class. This pressure has generated a desperation about the family which has opened people up to the irrational politics of the "pro-family" program, with its anti-gay and anti-women content.

The rise of the pro-family ideology supports and feeds into the resurgence of national chauvinism. The idealization of the days when men were men and women knew their place fits perfectly the militaristic nationalism which yearns for the days when the U.S. was on top and the rest of the world knew its place. The return of the paterfamilias and the Pax Americana go hand in hand. A nation of pantywaists can hardly do battle in the world to secure our right to domination.

Not surprisingly, this macho identification with the Nation—and the restoration of its power—runs much stronger among men than women. Many more men than women were attracted to Ronald Reagan. (54% of all male voters went for Reagan compared to 46% of all women voters). Polls indicated that women's concerns revolved as much around fears that Reagan would start a war as around his opposition to the ERA and abortion. Still, the combination of pro-nation and pro-family ideology forms a potent mix and has proved increasingly attractive to both men and women.

### III. THE CAPITALIST OFFENSIVE AND RIGHT WING-POPULISM

At least in the short run, it is possible to put forward a powerfully pro-capitalist politics without having to take on what have traditionally been the best organized sections of the working class. Indeed, the decaying political and economic position of the unionized workers in basic industry appears to offer the opening for right wing ideas to penetrate the working class. Since the rise of the CIO in the 1930's, these workers have formed the mass base for progressive social legislation. Yet, today, they are being forced onto the defensive.

In order to deal with increasingly effective foreign competitors and declining markets, industrial capitalists in this country have moved to "rationalize." They want to cut away inefficient plant and eliminate inefficient work practices. They intend to make do, for the foreseeable future, with a vastly scaled-down plant, equipped with the most

advanced technique. The result has been a significant loss of jobs in basic industry. In steel the workforce was reduced by 25% between 1960 and 1979 (from 449,900 to 339,200). Overall, between 1969 and 1976 at least 15 million workers have lost jobs as a result of plant shut-downs.

The effect of this rationalization process has been to retard the development of a working class counter-response. On the one hand, fighting layoffs or organizing the unemployed is notoriously difficult, and simply has not yet happened. On the other hand, those workers remaining employed have tended to enjoy relatively favorable situations. In steel, for example, the average weekly wage increased from \$166 to \$433 (161%) over the period of "world crisis in steel" between 1970 and the present. In auto, the situation is similar—hourly straight time earnings rose from \$4 to \$11. The result is not only a work force that inevitably feels relatively privileged, but at the same time is only too aware of its weakness given the precarious position of much of U.S. core industries. When the employers demand stringent wage cuts to insure profits, workers can be prevailed upon to make the concession—as happened recently at Chrysler and U.S. Steel.

In sum, there seems to be emerging in the U.S. something like the "two-tiered" labor force so prevalent in parts of Europe. This is characterized by a fairly restricted, well-organized, well-paid sector, concentrated in heavy industry (as well as some of the high technology lines) alongside an increasingly large, poorly-paid sector in government jobs, service employment, and "labor-squeezing" industry. For example, in 1970 steel workers earned \$83 more per week than garment workers. By 1980, the gap had grown to \$277 per week. This structure creates huge problems for working class organizing and left politics wherever it has emerged. It is causing specially great difficulties in the U.S., because even the best-organized, well-off sector feels so weak.

Thus, the still relatively privileged workers of the industrial core, in the face of their position as an evermore isolated minority are attracted to the most narrow interpretation of their interests. They naturally still come at politics from the standpoint of trade unionists. But they draw only the most limited conclusions. In the summer of 1980, the AFL-CIO polled its membership on key political issues. The results showed that union members believed three to one that government was more to blame than business for the recession, and three to two that there is too much government regulation of business. 72% opposed cuts in military spending. 65% favored a constitutional amendment to balance the budget. 60% opposed the Panama Canal Treaty. 44% opposed legalized abortion. These workers did put a high priority on *immediate* labor issues. They overwhelmingly affirmed they would vote in favor of candidates who were strong on issues such as the right to organize, job safety, paying prevailing (union) wages on government contracts, over candidates who supported tax cuts, increased military spending, limits on abortion but were weak on union issues. Even so, some 44% of unionized workers voted for Reagan in November, while in 1976 the more moderate, Gerald Ford took only 39% of the labor vote.

Although industrial union voters probably have not moved more sharply to the right than workers as a whole, the shift by this layer is especially dangerous. For union action and union funds have been an important base for



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social welfare politics and policies since the 1930's. Today, these workers—especially those in the CIO industrial unions—who have most consistently projected the closest thing to a class view of politics in the U.S., seem to be abandoning that position. Defending themselves by trying to shift the effects of the employers' offensive onto the weakest sectors, they are moving toward what has been called "neo-populist" conservatism—the politics projected by right wing Republicans like Jack Kemp from Buffalo. This neo-populist program centers in particular on heavy tax cuts, benefitting mostly the capitalists, but also parts of working class (at least those parts of it least dependent on state services). These tax cuts are to be balanced by massive cuts in social expenditures hitting the poor, most especially the racial minorities, while military spending remains protected. In addition, supposedly to stimulate and protect investment, all government regulation of business (environmental protections, job safety,) would end. To complete the picture, affirmative action and busing would be eliminated. Protection for industry threatened by foreign imports is also projected—but is least likely to be implemented. Much of this program will undoubtedly be put into practice by Reagan. It will, of course, be justified as "in the national interest," and in covertly racist terms. And it cannot help but result in strengthening the right, organizationally and ideologically.

### IV. THE BANKRUPTCY OF LIBERALISM AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Reacting to the growing strength of the right, many have felt they have no choice but to rally around the remaining liberals and social democrats—politicians, trade union officials, and community leaders. These elements seem to carry some political clout, so we should "go where the action is." These leaders still articulate policies that appear to oppose the right. Isn't it common sense to support them, especially with the working class drifting rightward?

Unfortunately, neither the social democrats nor liberals—today it is difficult to tell them apart—will on their own offer an alternative to the right for the working class. The implication of the analysis which we have made here is that the only way to fight the right is through organization that confronts capital; that, for example, insists on maintaining government services at the expense of business, not other workers; and that champions the special demands of the oppressed. It is necessary, through action and politics, to counter the splits within the working class which are pushing workers toward the right. None of the current "progressive" leaderships can be relied on to do this.

The high tide for liberalism and social democracy came, naturally, during the economic expansion of the 1960's. In this era it was possible to win gains through pressure group politics, without threatening capitalist profit. Even then, it was the social movements of the time—especially the Black movement which developed in the streets, largely apart from the official leadership of liberalism and social democracy—which provided the muscle necessary to extract the advances that were made.

Today, with capitalism in crisis, social democrats and liberals have had the rug pulled out from under them.

Since they accept the basic capitalist structure, they see no choice but to help restore the prosperity on which their programs depend by helping to restore capitalist profits. Thus, here and abroad, nearly universally, social democrats have given up any hope of winning significant economic advances for the working class. Instead, they have accepted austerity programs as an unfortunate necessity in the here and now in order to achieve a better condition in the future.

Of course, both liberals and social democrats want to soften the impact of austerity by equalizing its impact. They want "equality of sacrifice," from capital and labor. Let everyone pull together to "get the economy moving again." In every country they have argued that wage controls are acceptable if accompanied by price controls, presumably to prevent "unjustified" profits. In turn, as an alternative to "destructive labor-management conflict," they have offered "worker participation," so that workers and management can together administer production, supposedly in the interests of economic growth.

Nonetheless, wage and price controls and worker participation can only be cosmetic covers for involving the working class in its own exploitation. If profits are "too low," then they must be raised to stimulate increased investment—the single key to economic recovery. The immediate way to raise profits is to lower labor costs, i.e., wages. And that is the whole point of austerity. If wage and price controls are to serve their purpose they must be administered to allow prices to rise enough to increase profits, while wages are kept down. Workers participation schemes are also organized with the conscious purpose of increasing the firm's profitability. The aim is to elicit workers' input in the interest of rationalization—reorganizing the labor force and the labor process to increase productivity.

Because they have no intention of organizing their supporters to take action against capital, social democrats and liberals alike have necessarily fallen back into the sectional strategies that can win the support of their own constituencies. Thus, we see the UAW dropping its traditional opposition to import controls and its commitment to environmental protection. Seeking to save his auto worker followers by protecting "their own capitalists," Doug Fraser, President of the UAW has called for legislation against foreign auto imports and for Congress to relax pollution standards for automobiles.

Similarly, given their refusal to lead their ranks in a fight against the employers, trade union leaders (not to mention "progressive politicians") are in a bad position to argue in favor of programs such as affirmative action and welfare which defend the weaker unorganized members of the working class. Even worse, unable to offer a solution to the resentment that their memberships feel about the squeeze on their living standards, the labor leaders have even capitulated to the sentiment against those more vulnerable workers. Thus we find Albert Shanker, head of the American Federation of Teachers, arguing that in supporting Reagan, Americans were rejecting "liberal excesses" such as busing, racial and ethnic quotas (which create "new injustices"), and bi-lingual education.

Finally, over the next few years, there will be growing pressure on these former liberals in the trade unions and the Democratic Party to cave in on one of the most critical policy issues facing them—the demand for militarization and increased arms expenditure.



The fact is that so long as the labor officials and progressive politicians project policies designed to develop the *national* capitalist economy, (protectionism, austerity, increased defense spending, cuts in government services) they will fail to offer an alternative to the right. On the contrary, the *real content* of their politics—their class-collaborationism, their nationalism, their implicit racism—simply reinforces those ideas and attitudes around which the right is organizing directly.

Although the Left cannot hope to fight the right with a policy of uncritical support for so-called progressive elements, it does not at all follow that united fronts with liberals are precluded in the period ahead. Particularly, when they are no longer the majority and therefore formally in "opposition," as they are today, some liberal politicians may well become involved in defense efforts against the worst excesses of the right (for example, around civil liberties or the worst racist and sexist abuses). In such cases it is not only necessary but desirable to engage in united fronts with them. But in doing so, we can not afford to rely upon them. It is necessary to always maintain political and organizational independence to prevent their inconsistencies from derailing any developing movement against the right.

## OUT OF THE IMPASSE

The key to qualitatively changing the overall political climate in the U.S. and to a reversal of the drift to the right, is a breakthrough to a new period of workers struggle against the capitalist class. This can happen very quickly. In the early '30's it took three and a half bitter years of depression in which struggles were few and far between, before rank and file upsurges in a few places finally sparked a massive upheaval. Almost all at once, the possibility for collective action was made real. As a class struggle world view became practical, the political mood shifted from one of cynicism and defeat to militancy and class consciousness.

Such a development is potentially contained in the present economic crisis. There will be no restabilization of the capitalist economy in the coming period. Indeed, pressures on the working class will intensify across the board. The possibility for a breakthrough exists. But we can not predict when, nor base a strategy on its imminent occurrence. In the meantime, how and where can we work to build a class conscious, militant layer within the working class which can begin to organize a counteroffensive to the right?

It seems likely that Reagan will not head for a confrontation with the most powerful unions. His policy will be to complete the process of housebreaking them, so that they cooperate and do not spark other oppressed layers by their example. Initially, he is likely to succeed. Fraser's concurrence in modifying the EPA rules and his advocacy of protectionism tell us how easy his cooptation will be, if Reagan does not overplay his hand and provoke the ranks into a response. Indeed, Fraser's telegram to Reagan after the election offering "cooperation" is reminiscent of a similar offer of "cooperation" made by the social democratic leaders of Germany's unions immediately after Hitler's election in 1933. As for the ranks, relative government leniency (for example, allowing wage increases above the average), and the strongly entrenched bureaucratic leadership of the UAW, USW, IAM, etc., as well as the

awareness of workers that their industries are weak today, will combine to retard action in this sector at least for a time. But that is not to say that there will be no fight back. There will be opportunities, however exceptional, of which socialists can take advantage, if not always precipitate.

First, while the splits within the working class have opened up many workers to the ideas of the right, the experience of others is leading them to recognize very clearly that the right and its program are the enemy. The most powerful unions in the core industries may for the time being stay quite. But they represent at most 10% of the work force. Among the "other" 70 million workers, weakly organized or unorganized, are those taking the brunt of the crisis. It is quite likely that initially the ranks of these workers who are organized into the less powerful unions will be first to respond.

Among unionized workers, public employees have offered the greatest resistance—even though they have often suffered defeats. The pressures on these workers will continue. California's Proposition 13 is finally having its real impact, since the state has exhausted the surpluses needed to bail out local government services. In Massachusetts, there are no state surpluses to cushion the blow of Proposition 2½, and at this point basic services including schools and other sources of public employment are severely threatened. Because public worker unions are far less regulated by national contracts or controlled by tight knit bureaucracies, such as the UAW, there is more chance for local rank and file militancy to break through. For the bureaucracy, is less capable of interfering to choke off struggle.

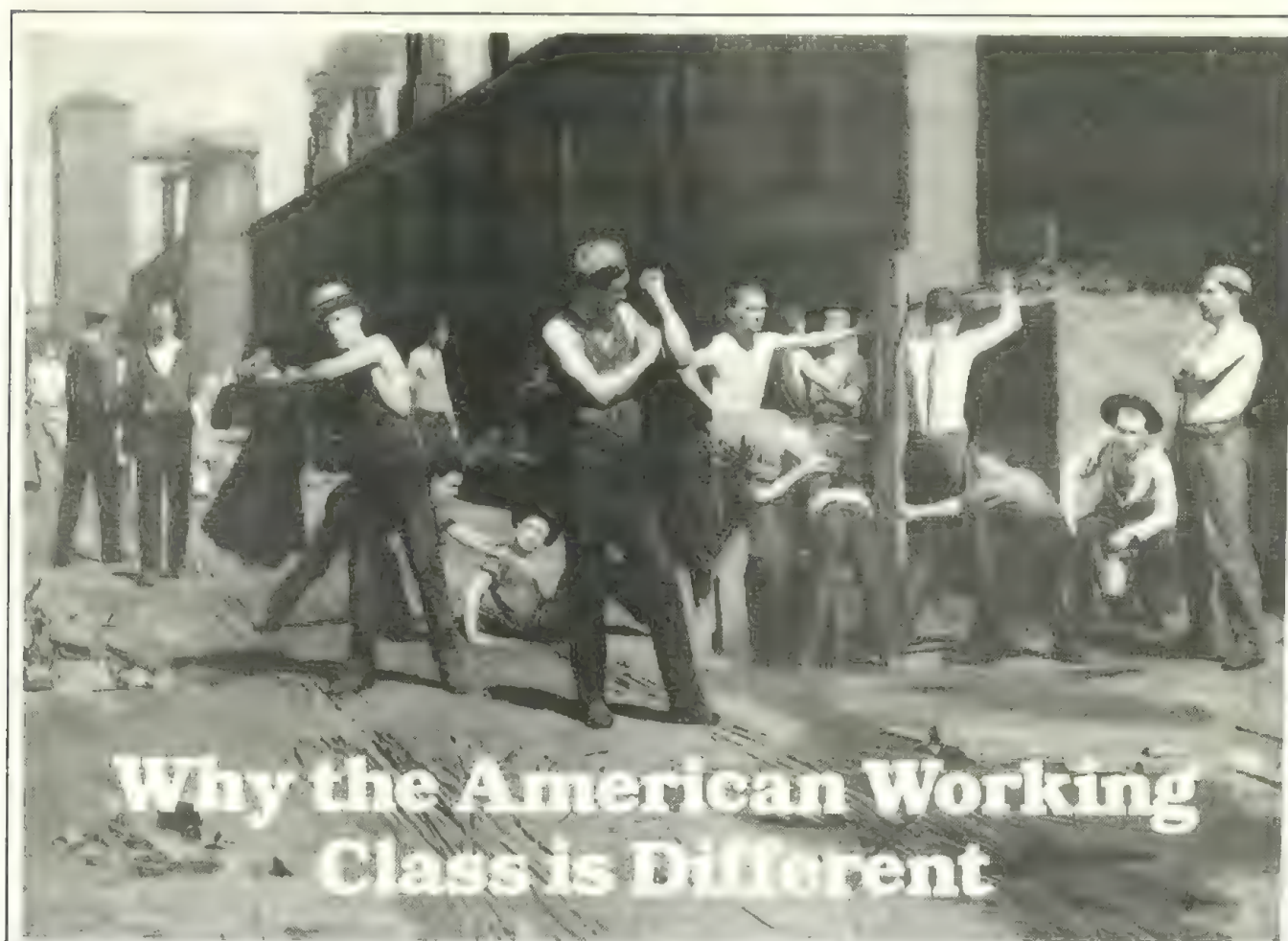
Second, the attacks on Blacks, gays and women is certain to increase—not just directly from Reagan but as a result of the climate of opinion which created him and which his victory has already strengthened. The Black community especially has begun to respond to the rising tide of racism not only by spontaneous outbreaks, such as the Liberty City rebellion in Miami, but also by local organizing against the Klan and Nazis in anti-racist coalitions in many cities.

So it is primarily in these two areas—in the militant brush fire movements of class struggle in the public sector, and in the local embryonic movements of the oppressed—that the left can find openings. What can we offer these struggles? Above all, a political strategy.

The point of this strategy has to be to show the self-defeating character of sectional approaches based on immediate short run interests and to provide a class unifying alternative. What follows is the need for mutual support and defense which means bringing working class issues into the movements and movement issues into the unions.

Secondly, a *systematic*, that is, a political solution is needed. That, in turn requires a political instrument, a working class party which incorporates the needs and aspirations of the movements. Recognizing the need for such a party is one thing. But it seems dubious that a movement for constructing such a party is, at this moment, capable of mobilizing the ranks of the unions or the movements. We are therefore left, for the present, with the more elemental defensive instrument—direct action and rank and file mobilization *which are the real prerequisites for political action*, as the most immediate and initial means of combating the right.





by MIKE DAVIS

## **SOCIALIST THEORY CONFRONTS AMERICA**

**I**n 1829 a group of Philadelphia artisans organized the first "Labor Party" in world history. Now, one hundred and fifty years later, a television news camera depicts a group of modern Philadelphia workers arguing in their local tavern over the candidates in the 1980 presidential election.

Against a background of irreverent catcalls and hisses, one worker attempts to defend Carter, with little conviction, as the "lesser of evils," while another worker, with even less enthusiasm, tries to float the idea of a "protest" vote for Reagan. Finally, with the nodding assent of most of the crowd, a rather definitive voice spells out the name of the popular choice in the campaign: N-O-T-A, e.g., "none of the above." He underlines his point with the declaration that he intends to occupy a barstool rather than a polling booth on election day.

In no other capitalist country is mass political abstentionism as fully developed as in the United States, where a "silent majority" of the working class has sat out more than half the elections of the last century. Arguably, this mute, atomized protest is closely related to the striking absence of an independent political party of the working class in the country which once upon a time invented both the "labor party" and May Day.

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*[Mike Davis is a member of the editorial board of both Against the Current and New Left Review. A somewhat different version of this article appears in the September issue of NLR.]*

Perhaps no other feature of American history is as vital and difficult for Marxist theory as understanding the connection between the evolution of the *economic* class struggle in the U.S., and a political system which has managed to repulse every attempt to create a working class political alternative. The relative absence in the U.S. of working class self-organization and consciousness, and of a workers party has long haunted American Marxism. As a first approach to the problem it may be useful to briefly review the perspective which "classical" revolutionary theory has offered toward understanding "American exceptionalism."

### **Classical Perspectives**

At one time or another, Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Lenin, and Trotsky all became fascinated with the prospects for the development of a revolutionary movement in the United States. For a variety of reasons, they shared in the optimism that "in the long run" the differences between European and American levels of class consciousness and political organization would be evened out by objective laws of historical development. In their view the American working class was a more or less "immature" version of a European working class. Its development had been retarded or deflected by various historically specific, short-term, and, therefore, *transient* conditions: the "frontier," continuous immigration, the attraction of agrarian-democratic ideologies bound up with middle class property, the



international dominance of American capital, etc.

Sooner or later, they thought, these temporary conditions would begin to erode—through the closing of the frontier, the restriction of European immigration, the triumph of monopoly over small capital, the decline of U.S. capital's lead in world industrial productivity, etc. As a result, the more profound and permanent historical determinants which arise out of the very structure of capitalism would come into play. In this shared scenario, a profound economic crisis would ultimately unleash class struggles on a titanic scale. Furthermore the very breadth and violence of this economic class struggle would provoke escalating collisions with state power. In such a crisis the capitalist democratic institutions of American society, which were previously an obstacle to class coalescence, would provide a springboard for independent political action and the formation of a mass labor or socialist party. The stages of development which had taken the European working class generations to traverse would be "compressed" in America by an accelerated process of "combined and uneven development."

Thus Engels, writing in 1886, had little doubt that the dramatic growth of the Knights of Labor together with the massive vote for Henry George in New York City's mayoralty election signaled the birth of mass labor politics in America. (Engels, in fact, advised the "backward" English labor movement to take these more "advanced" American events as their model!) A similar conclusion was drawn by Lenin with regard to the apparent giant strides of the Socialist Party in the elections of 1912, and again by Trotsky when, in the aftermath of the rise of the C.I.O. and the great sit-down strikes of 1936-37, a labor party again seemed to be the order of the day.



*Victorious sitdowners marching out of factory.*

### **False Promises**

All these hopes for a qualitative political transformation of the class struggle in the U.S. have, however, remained unfulfilled despite the seemingly favorable opportunities—in the 1880's, in the days of Debsian socialism, and

again, in the heat of the CIO. In spite of the periodic intensity of the economic class struggle and the appearance of "new lefts" in every generation since the Civil War, the rule of Capital has, to this day, remained less politically contested than in any other advanced country.

To some, of course, this is no dilemma at all, but an expression of the relative permanence of characteristics which have always distinguished American history, particularly the lack of a feudal past, and the existence of powerful liberal and egalitarian traditions. To the liberal writers who hold this view, the political cooptation of the working class into the system, and the working class's long-run submission were predestined.

Unfortunately, traces of this same sort of abstract, ahistorical view of politics tinge even the work of many Marxist writers, who have tried to explain the uniqueness of the American working class in terms of some single, over-riding peculiarity of U.S. history such as the impact of immigration or the role of white racism.

There is, however, an alternative to both the old Marxist "orthodoxy," with its faith in the eventual "normalization" of the class struggle in America, and the various theories of American exceptionalism, with their emphasis on the passive submission of the working class to forces and processes which inevitably lead to workers' cooptation. This approach takes off from the premise that the Marxist classics underestimated the impact of historical experiences upon the working class's capacities for further development in subsequent periods. Each major cycle of class struggle, economic crisis, and social restructuring in American history has been finally resolved through epochal tests of strength between capital and labor. The results of these historical collisions have determined, to a very important extent, the objective conditions for the accumulation of capital in the next period, as well as the subjective conditions for class organization and consciousness. The traditional Marxist emphasis on the "temporary" character of obstacles to political class consciousness ignores the cumulative impact of the series of historic defeats suffered by the American working class. As I will attempt to show, each defeat of the American labor movement disarmed the next generation in some vital respect, for the challenges and battles which faced it.

The ultimate, but by no means inevitable, outcome of this disrupted development is a working class with unique features which set it off from the European workers' movement. The absence of a social democratic party in the U.S. is only the most dramatic symptom of this difference—a symptom of the qualitatively different levels of class consciousness and social cohesion.

Thus, the working classes of Western Europe are all, today, politically "incorporated" through *labor reformism*. That is, their relationship to the capitalists is regulated by institutions—built by the working class—political parties, trade unions, educational associations, recreational clubs, etc.—which tend to create and maintain a class conscious "us vs. them" attitude, if not a revolutionary attitude, toward the employers. The solidity of this working class culture and identity is remarkable.

On the other hand, the American working class today lacks the same rich array of collective institutions. One should therefore distinguish between the *reformist* working class in Western Europe—whose collective institutions integrate it into the established order and, at the same time, serve as a springboard to challenge that order



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—and the “disorganized” and increasingly “depoliticized” working class in the United States. This contrast became most evident during the postwar wave of economic expansion. In spite of the stabilization of parliamentary democracy and increasing mass consumption, the European working class maintained a combativity and independence missing in the U.S. working class. As a result, workers in Europe were able to respond far more effectively to the original phases of the world economic crisis during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

Thus, the present article aims to be a kind of historical preface to an analysis of the contemporary “crisis” of class consciousness in the United States. Focusing on the changing interconnections between economic class struggles, class composition, and the political system, I will attempt to retrace the chain of historic “defeats” and blocked possibilities which have shaped and misshaped the position of the American working class in postwar society. I develop my argument in three steps:

First I examine the unique course of bourgeois democratic revolution in the United States and how that affected the initial formation of the working class and its inability to achieve political autonomy.

Second, I survey, from several interrelated perspectives, the contradictory relationship between unifying waves of labor militancy and the turbulent recomposition of the working class due to European immigration and internal migration. In particular I examine the successive failures of “labor-Abolitionism,” “labor-populism,” and Debsian socialism to provide durable foundations for independent class politics or to overcome the barriers to a unitary working class subculture in the U.S.

Third, I consider the legacy of the class struggles of the Roosevelt-Truman era in determining the current “disorganization” in the United States.

### THE PARADOX OF AMERICAN ‘DEMOCRACY’

There have been two historical paths by which independent labor politics have emerged in industrializing societies. The first—embracing continental Europe—has involved the precipitation of a distinct working class political current in the course of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. The second route—followed by Britain and most of its white-settler offspring Australia, New Zealand, and Canada—passed through a stage of initially syndicalist militancy—later transformed by economic crisis, state repression, and the rise of new working class strata. In this section I will examine some of the most important reasons why the political terrain in the early American Republic was so unfavorable to the first of these processes.

In every European nation the working classes were forced to conduct protracted struggles for suffrage and civil liberties. The initial phases of the active self-formation of the European working classes encompassed simultaneously both elementary economic organization and rudimentary political mobilization for democratic rights. Every European working class forged its early identity through revolutionary-democratic mass movements: Chartism in Britain (1832-48), the Lasallean and “Illegal” periods of German labor (1860-85), the bitter struggle of Belgian labor for the extension of the vote, the battle against absolutism in Russia (1898-1917), the emergence of the Irish labor movement in the dual struggle against native bosses and English overlords (1905-21), etc.

In the face of the failure of the middle classes to carry through the struggle for a democratic nation, the working class movements were forced to organize politically to carry on the democratic struggle through their own independent mobilizations. That is, to prosecute the “economic” or “social” struggle, it was necessary to organize politically. Thus the strength of working class radicalism and the degree of its conscious self-reliance were conditioned by both the relative social power of the capitalists and the extent to which democratic revolution had been left “unfinished.” In a general sense we can distinguish three kinds of national contexts in which an original fusion of economic and political working class consciousness took place: (1) Against an already established dominant capitalist class which restricted the franchise (e.g. Britain or Belgium in the 19th century); (2) within the framework of an *on-going* bourgeois-democratic revolution (e.g. France in 1848-52, Ireland in 1916-21, etc.); or (3) In a situation in which a bourgeois-democratic revolution was either absent or impossible (e.g. Russia in 1905-17—the pattern of “permanent revolution”). Working class militancy received a *different impetus* within each of these situations, yet in all cases some mode of working class political independence turned out to be a necessary development (whether as a nonviolent petitioning campaign or as a centralized underground party).

In the United States, on the other hand, a very different politico-juridical framework was present during the infancy of the working class. The most obvious fact which impressed itself on every Old World visitor was the startling absence of residual pre-capitalist class structures and social institutions. Indeed, the Northern colonies started out in possession of the most advanced production relations and ideological superstructures of the 17th century: British merchant and agrarian capitalism, Puritan religion, and Lockean democratic philosophy. Long after their official suppression in Britain, New England popular consciousness safeguarded the radical doctrines of the English Revolution and continued to translate them into practice. By no later than 1750, for example, somewhere between one half and three quarters of the adult white males in New England, including much of the artisan population, were already exercising a local franchise. By the second term of Andrew Jackson in 1832, property qualifications had been removed in all but four of the states. Thus, in dramatic contradistinction to Europe, popular sovereignty (for white males) was the *pre-existent* ideological and institutional framework for the industrial revolution and the rise of the proletariat.

A second, almost equally important difference between Europe and America was the class composition of the leadership of the democratic movement. In Europe bourgeois liberalism had (at least until 1848) generally taken the position of adamant *opposition* to “democracy.” Its strategic aim was to mobilize the plebian masses against aristocratic power without simultaneously being forced to concede universal suffrage. The manipulation of the English working classes by Cobbett and the Whigs in the reform struggles of the 1820’s and early 1830’s is a classic case. To the extent, therefore, that the bourgeois revolution actually became a democratic “revolution,” it was because elements of the plebian strata (urban artisans, petty bourgeoisie, declassed intellectuals—supported by the multitudes of journeymen, laborers, and sections of the peasantry) violently seized leadership. This usually oc-



curred in the context of a life or death threat to the survival of the revolution or temporizing betrayal by the leading capitalist elements (France in 1791, Germany in 1849, etc.).

By contrast in the United States the leadership of the bourgeois-democratic "revolution" was dominated, without significant challenge, by the political representatives of the American capitalist class. *Thus, in a certain ironic sense, the American capitalist class* (large merchants, bankers, big capitalist landowners or planters, and, later, industrialists) *was the only "classical" revolutionary-democratic bourgeoisie in world history.* All other bourgeois-democratic revolutions depended, to one degree or another, upon plebian wings or other substitute classes, to defeat aristocratic reaction and demolish the structure of the old regimes.

This was partially a result of the fact that the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution in America was not an uprising against a moribund feudalism. Rather, it was a unique process of capitalist national liberation which involved between 1760-1860 a multi-phase struggle against the constraints which globally dominant British capital imposed on the growth of native bourgeois society. It is possible to see the Revolution of 1776, for instance, as in part a civil war against Loyalist strata in the same sense that the Civil War was a revolution against an informal British imperialism which had incorporated the cotton export economy of the South in an alliance of neo-colonial dependency. In the first phase, 1776, a merchant-planter coalition overthrew the obstacles to internal expansion. In the second state, 1860-64, an alliance of industrial capital and western farmers created the preconditions for complete national economic integration.

Moreover the American capitalist class was able to rely upon exceptional class alliances to consolidate its rule. The existence in the United States of a numerically dominant class of small capitalist farmers was crucial. It provided a solid social anchorage for an explicitly capitalist politics celebrating the sanctity of private property and the virtue of capital accumulation. Since the ideology of the industrial capitalists found such sympathy in the outlook of the majority of the Northern agrarian class, mass democratic politics did not pose the same kind of dangers as they did in most of Europe where the middle strata were so much weaker in the nineteenth century. In other words, the *European* capitalists had to fight long delaying actions (frequently in alliance with residual aristocracies) against the advance of a broad franchise, which they feared would give power to workers and peasants. But the industrial fraction of the *American* ruling class, relying on the moderating social ballast of the farmers, was able to achieve national political dominance in 1860 at the head of the revolutionary-democratic crusade against slavocracy and its international allies.

## THE CONSERVATISM OF THE DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

As Louis Corey noted many years ago, the existence of a "democratic" bourgeoisie made it much more difficult for artisans and workers to constitute themselves as an autonomous force in the pre-Civil War period. The same factors also gave the democratic movement in America its relatively "conservative" cast compared to Europe. In the U.S., unlike the anti-feudal revolutions of France or Spain, there was no need to create a new ideology (which, as in France)

might later serve as a model for revolutionary movements. The plebian colonial masses did not rise up under the leadership of their planter and mercantile "revolutionaries" in 1776 to ignite a worldwide democratic revolution—as the working class and artisan followers of Saint-Just and Robespierre would aspire to do a few years later—but rather to *defend* the special gift of popular liberty which God and Locke had already given to their Puritan ancestors. Similarly, in arousing the North in 1861, Lincoln and Republicans vehemently rejected the revolutionary slogans of Garrison and the Abolitionists (the extension of "equal rights" to Afro-Americans and the destruction of the slave order) to appeal, instead, to the "preservation of the Union and Free *White* Labor." These ideological nuances have far more than incidental significance; they testify both to the solidity of bourgeois political domination and to the truncated nature of the dynamic of "permanent democratic revolution" in America.

All this should not be taken to mean, however, that the artisans or early industrial working classes in America were without clearly conceived interests or articulate voices of their own. Yet, without underestimating the economic militancy of the early working class or its devotion to the struggle against "Oligarchy," it is necessary to emphasize the structural and cultural obstacles to any thorough-going radicalization of the democratic movement and to the crystallization of an autonomous working politics. *While American workers provided shock troops in defense of "Equal Rights," they never created independent political movements with the influence or historical impact of Chartism or French socialism.*

The famous Workingmen's Parties of 1829-32 which the young Marx celebrated as the first parties of labor may seem an obvious exception. But the "Workies" were a socially composite movement whose concept of the "workingman" excluded only bankers, speculators, and a few Tammany Hall bosses. The workingman's movement of the 1830's undoubtedly did focus and express the concerns of pre-industrial workers, strengthened impulses toward trade union organization, and trained laborers in the art of politics; but it never achieved more than the most preliminary level of political self-consciousness.

Incipient class consciousness was blunted by two illusions: one economic, one political. The economic illusion grew out of the prevalence of petty production and small property. This may not have created the fabled universal mobility of the Jacksonian Age. But it generated at least a significantly greater fluidity of class boundaries between journeymen and the layer of small entrepreneurs. The result was an ideology of "Producerism" which contrasted producers to parasitic "money power" and thus encouraged the fusion of all strata of workers and most capitalists into a single "industrial" bloc. This outlook did not begin to significantly break down until the great crisis of 1873-77 brought capital and labor into confrontation on a national scale for the first time.

The political illusion which followed the false perception of class relationships, was the popular view of the state as an agency of democratic reform. *The existence of a unique and more or less unrestricted white manhood suffrage imparted to the Jacksonian working class a deep belief in the exceptionalism of American society. Unlike their European brothers who experienced, both the absence of political and economic freedom, white American workingmen came to contrast their political*



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*liberty with their economic exploitation.* In his study of the transformation of the artisan shoemakers of Lynn (Mass.) into a dependent factory proletariat, Alan Dawley repeatedly emphasizes their persistent belief that they possessed "a vested interest in the existing political system." Whereas European workers tended to view the state as "an instrument of their oppression, controlled by hostile social and economic interests," against which it was necessary to organize in separate class parties. American workers tended to cling to the illusion of a meliorative "popular sovereignty."

**Y**et it would be foolish to take this line of reasoning too far. The political "cooptation" of native workers in the pre-civil-war era had definite limits. Any attempt to *unilaterally* explain the deradicalization of the working class through the integrative powers of mass democracy must necessarily flounder. Nineteenth century labor history proved time and again that the very "parliamentary illusions," borne by the working class also carried subversive potentials. In the face of increasing exploitation and class polarization, for example, the egalitarian ideology of American laborers (like the New England shoemakers) could become a powerful catalyst for collective organization as well as for militant resistance (unleashing the Great Strike of 1860). Unlike Europe, where factory masters could frequently command many generation-long lower class patterns of deference and cultural subordination, the American industrialists had to deal with "freeborn" Yankee workers who rejected paternalism and demanded to be treated as equals. From the Jacksonian period onward, the native working class ethos of "Equal Rights"—so deeply engrained by the mass upheavals of 1776, 1828, and 1861—came increasingly into collision with the emergence of the factory system and the concentration of economic power.

Furthermore the level of these ideological tensions was amplified by the exceptional violence of the battle for union recognition in the United States. The fact of working class suffrage as an integrative force in America must be balanced against the great difficulty of Yankee trade unions in achieving durable organization. To make a comparison to the British case: If American workmen possessed an unrestricted vote over half a century earlier than their English brothers and sisters, they also had to struggle almost a generation longer in the face of hostile courts and intransigent employers to consolidate their first craft unions. American labor may have never had to face the carnage of a Paris Commune or defeated revolution, but it has been bled in countless "Peterloos" at the hands of Pinkertons or the militia.

In this context, it seems reasonable to ask why the impact of industrialism and cyclical crisis upon mobility and wages, when coupled with widespread legal repression, did not undermine the U.S. working class's fundamental illusions in bourgeois political leadership. After all, there was a second path toward working class political independence represented by the rise of labor parties of other "democratic" Anglo-Saxon nations; particularly where this process has involved—as in Edwardian England or postwar Canada—the breakdown of previous political incorporation with capitalist parties (primarily liberal parties). In all these cases, economic organization came first and led to political independence as the latter became necessary to fight the economic struggle. Add to this, the fact of state repression as a midwife to the birth of labor

parties (a point to which I will return in the following section). Late 19th century or early 20th century America possessed all these ingredients in full measure. Why then—despite several embryonic ruptures and temporary defections, did American labor, unlike the Europeans, fail to take advantage of broad suffrage to forge its own political instruments? The next stage in answering this question is to shift focus from the structure of the political system to the historical composition of the working class.

### POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND CLASS COMPOSITION

**T**he increasing working class character of the American economy has not been matched by an equal tendency toward a politically or culturally united working class. Divisions rooted in the labor process (such as skilled versus unskilled, blue versus white collar) have been reinforced by deepseated ethnic, religious, racial, and sexual antagonisms within the working class. In different periods these divisions have produced distinct, mutually hostile hierarchies (e.g. "native skilled Protestant" versus "immigrant unskilled Catholic," etc.) representing unequal access to employment, consumption, legal rights, and trade union organization. Furthermore, the real political power of the working class within American "democracy" has always been greatly diluted by the effective disfranchisement of large sectors of labor: blacks, immigrants, women, migrant workers, etc.

Periodically in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the search for defensive organization at the workplace produced waves of mass struggle which temporarily overrode or weakened some of the divisions, and led to the formation of a succession of united economic organizations of the working class. But until the 1930's—and then only under the peculiar circumstances which I will analyze later—*no comparable dynamic emerged on the political plane.* The most victimized and disfranchised sectors of the working class had to seek political equality by their own efforts, and usually through incorporating themselves within the multi-class coalitions which formed the base of one or the other of the two capitalist political parties. To the discomfort of many Marxists as well as economic determinists of the Beardian school, all recent analyses of mass voting patterns in the U.S. between 1870 and 1932 have corroborated the primacy of *ethnoreligious* cleavages as the most consistent determinates of party loyalty and voting preference.

This contradictory dialectic of class unification/class divisions, as well as the corresponding tendency toward the separation of workplace and political consciousness, needs to be examined concretely. Three waves of mass struggle stand out as key phases in the formation of the industrial working class in America: (1) the early battles for trade unionism and a shorter working day, 1832-60; (2) the volcanic postbellum labor insurgencies of 1877, 1884-87, and 1892-96; and (3) the great tide of strikes from 1909-22 which was only superficially punctuated by the 1914-15 recession.

All periodizations are somewhat arbitrary and risk obscuring important continuities and causal linkages. But I believe these three periods define distinct generations of working class consciousness, each shaped by common experiences of economic militancy, and culminating in crises in which each temporarily posed the question of independent political action. In this section we consider the



roles of racism and nativism in preventing American workers from "seizing the time" in the pivotal turning points of class struggle—especially in 1856-57, 1892-96, 1912, and 1919-24—when political realignment seemed most possible and necessary.

### A. Labor and The Civil War

The long decade from 1843 to 1856 was the crucible of explosive and highly uneven socio-economic transformations: the rise of mechanized consumer good industries in New England, the rapid capitalization of Mid-western agriculture, the acquisition of the Pacific Slope and the Southwest territories, the fitful booms and expansionist demands of King Cotton, etc. It was also an era of profound transition in the social structure. Thus the new Western cities and towns still offered something of the famous "safety valve" of social mobility. In contrast, the factory towns and great port cities of the Eastern seaboard witnessed the hardening of class lines and the constriction of opportunities for economic independence. The traditional artisanal working class, with its vague and fluid boundaries with the middle-class, had become partially superseded by two new strata of workers: first, the emergent factory proletariat rooted in the shoe and textile industries of New England, and second, the migrant armies of largely immigrant labor who moved across the face of the North building railways and digging canals.

In this phase of labor's infancy, romantic longings for imaginary past idylls coexisted with realistic intimations of the future. Time and again, in a pattern which would repeat itself almost to the eve of the twentieth century, the labor movement was deflected by utopian enthusiasms for monetary panaceas or free land schemes which would roll back industrialism and reestablish an idealized harmony of a "Republican social order" of small producers. At the same time, however, more hard-headed militants, sensing the inevitability of economic change and influenced by the model of British labor, began to dig in for the long-term struggle. From the mid-1830's onwards, journeymen in the big port cities began to assert their separate economic interests from masters, organizing their own benefit societies and early trade unions. Over the next two decades the center of gravity of this union movement began to shift either to skilled workers in the new mechanized industries like the cotton spinners and shoemakers, or toward the craftsmen who made the machines like the "engineers" (machinists), iron puddlers, and molders. Unfortunately their efforts were rewarded by few permanent successes: the broad Ten Hour Day agitation of the 1840's rose and fell; a first generation of trade unions perished in the Panic of 1837, a second in the Depression of 1857. Finally, on the eve of the Civil War, the most powerful trade union in North America—the New England Mechanics' Association (shoemakers)—was crushed after a long strike.

Labor's inability to emerge as an independent force in the Civil War, the greatest national crisis in American history, was to have immense consequences. The view that labor should intervene in the war in its own name ("labor abolitionism") was forcefully urged by Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips. Marx and Engels supported them from across the sea. But it was a stillborn crusade. There was no "labor wing" of the Lincoln coalition. And in the absence of a working class anti-slavery

current, labor lost the chance to forge its own links of unity with the black masses of the South or to create its own revolutionary democratic political tradition (as the European working classes had done).

One source of this failure by American workers was the fact that the early stages of industrialization tended to fragment rather than unify the working class. The temporary politicization of workers from 1829-34 rested upon their common culture as artisans. But after this interlude, in the following decades, three powerful centrifugal forces acted to pull the labor movement apart just as the American Industrial Revolution was reaching its take-off point.

### (1.) The Urban-Industrial Frontier

The first force was the very unevenness of the process of industrialization and proletarianization. Economic growth in America occurred not only through a concentric "deepening" around original nuclei, but also and especially through a succession of sectional developments. The new Western industrial cities (for example, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and Chicago after 1850) were built up almost overnight, with little continuity with pre-industrial traditions or social relations. This "boomtown" characteristic of American industrialization meant that the labor movement in the United States, with the partial exception of New England valleys and the older Eastern port cities, arose without those deep roots in the artisanal resistance to industrialism which many historians have stressed as vital to the formation of militant unionism and working class consciousness. Moreover it was this expanding urban-industrial frontier (rather than Turner's agrarian frontier) with its constantly renewed opportunities for small-scale capitalists, which provided the material base for the middle-class ideologies of individual mobility which gripped the minds of so many American workers. American workers—to a far greater extent than European workers—could vote with their feet against oppressive working conditions. *Geographic mobility became a substitute for collective action.*

### (2) Nativism and the Cultural Division of the American Proletariat

The second centrifugal influence—and decidedly the most disastrous obstacle to labor unity in the 1850's—was the reaction of native workers to the arrival of several million impoverished Irish and German laborers who came in a flood after the European crop failures of the 1840's. These new immigrants provided the cheap labor power for the growth of New England factories as well as the armies of raw muscle for Western railroads and Pennsylvania coalfields. They were met by the universal hostility of a native working class which rioted against them, evicted them from workplaces, refused them admission into trade unions, and tried to exclude them from the franchise. Partly rooted in purely economic rivalries in the labor market (although modern labor historiography has uprooted the hoary old myth that the Irish arrived in New England textile mills as strikebreakers), the Yankee versus immigrant polarization in the working class also reflected a profound cultural antagonism which would hinder efforts at labor unity for more than a century. It would be easy to define this cleavage as a persistent opposition between native-Protestant and immigrant Catholic workers. But it was more than that. For "religious conflict" does not



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capture the complex integration of religious, ethnic and popular customs which were fused into two rival sub-systems, and, at the same time, integrated, as rivals, into American bourgeois culture as a whole. (We return to this point below.)

Indeed one paradox of American culture is that while Engels was correct when he labeled it the "purest bourgeois culture," Marx was also equally right when he observed that "North America is pre-eminently the country of religiosity." In the absence of a state church or aristocratic hierarchy, secularization was not a requirement for liberalism, and America did not experience the same kind of "cultural revolution" represented by Jacobin anti-clericalism in Europe. Nor did the American working class develop the traditions of critical, defiant rationalism which on the Continent were so vital in orienting the working class toward socialism and in establishing an alliance with the intellectuals. Instead, the industrial revolution in America went hand in hand with the reinforcement of religious influences upon popular culture and working class consciousness.

### Divisive Role of Religion

Protestantism, for instance, was not merely a majority religion in pre-Civil War America; it was also an important component of popular republican nationalism. And, as Paul Johnson has recently argued, the renewal of pietism was also a powerful vehicle for establishing the social dominance of the new industrial capitalists. Religious moralism was the most effective weapon against those arch-enemies of industrial discipline and high profits: "drunkenness, spontaneous holidays, and inattention to work." As with the analogous role of English Methodism, however, evangelical religion could be a two-edged sword, and working men could appropriate its egalitarian side to put forward good, Protestant justifications for trade unionism and the Ten Hour Day.

In any event, the evangelistic fires were stoking the pietism of the Yankee working class to a white heat at the very moment when Catholic immigrants began to flood Eastern labor markets (American Catholics increased from 663,000 in 1840 to 3,103,000 in 1860). The Irish immigrants of the famine generation and their successors after 1850 were bringing with them to "the most militant Protestant nation in the world" a highly distinctive and energetic variant of Catholicism. Many labor historians have, incorrectly, characterized the religion of the immigrants as a deeply conservative, if not 'feudal' institution. This view ignores the anti-monarchical and pro-republican Catholicism of the Irish. The fierce religiosity of the Irish immigrants to America was closely associated with Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation Movement ("the first fully-fledged democratic political party known to the world"). Furthermore, the vast majority of Irish immigrants were scarcely peasants in any rigorous sense of the term; rather they were sharecroppers, marginal tenants, agricultural laborers, and seasonal navvies fleeing the genocidal consequences of colonial underdevelopment. Their revived religion was fused with a republican nationalism that had very different political implications than Catholic piety in French or Spanish contexts.

The key point is that the American Catholic Church which these Irish immigrants largely created and dominated was, in any comparative perspective, a force for adaptation to *liberal* capitalist society. In particular, the

Church's ties with resurgent Irish Catholicism, provided it with twin traditions: a plebeian (indeed, working class) clergy (in the 1940's Archbishop Cushing could boast to a CIO meeting that "not a single Bishop or Archbishop of the American hierarchy was the son of a college graduate"); and an openness to democratic ideology via the original fusion of religion and Irish nationalism. Faced with the challenge of the Knights of Labor in the 1880's, it was also the first national Catholic church to undertake an interventionist role in the labor movement, preserving its ideological domination through sponsorship of an anti-radical right wing in the trade unions.

The hegemony of the "modernist" wing of American Catholicism has only been secured through constant internal struggle, and it would be mistaken to underestimate the power of the conservative hierarchy at any particular point in history. Nevertheless, the adaptive "Americanists" have been the real pioneers of the Church's social and political insertion in American life. Occasionally they have also been the catalyst of change in the broader world church. Thus the battle of Cardinal Gibbons and the Americanists against church reactionaries over the question of the Knights of Labor paved the way for the 1891 *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo which brought a truce to the war between the Vatican and liberal and labor movements. In a sense, then, "Christian Democracy" was born in the United States.

The ingenuity of American Catholicism, already becoming apparent in the 1850's, was that it functioned as an apparatus for accelerating millions of Catholic immigrants to American liberal-capitalist society while simultaneously carving out its own sphere of cultural control through its (eventually) vast system of parochial schools and Catholic (or Catholic-ethnic) associations. This unique historical project embroiled the American Church in concurrent battles both against Vatican intransigents who opposed the rapprochement with "modernity," as well as with the mainstream of American Protestantism which feared that the Pilgrim heritage was in mortal danger from the twin (and interrelated) evils of "Rum and Romanism."

**T**he key point, therefore, is that it was not just immigration, not even Catholic immigration, *per se* which was breaking down the cultural homogeneity of the Northern working class. Rather, from the late 1840's onward, it is the formation of two great sub-cultures which were organized along a religious divide, but operated through an enormous array of institutions and movements (ranging from the Women's Christian Temperance Union to the Knights of Columbus), which cut across class lines, and integrated their membership into the larger capitalist society. Each of these great cultural-religious blocs encompassed a myriad of ethnic, denominational and sectional sub-alignments. Thus, the radical differences between the social and cultural experiences of American and most Western European workers was not the presence of ethnic or religious division, but the manner in which a multiplicity of these differences were brought together and counterposed to one another. The institutional complexes of "Protestant Nativism" and "Catholicism" were in some sense parallel agents of *acculturation* (e.g. Catholic schools did impart American nationalism, respect for property, etc. just as effectively as Protestant dominated public schools). But they were also *antagonistic structures of assimilation* (e.g. ethnic groups tended to form



alliances on denominational lines, ethnic exogamy remained religiously endogamous, etc.)

Cultural division was reproduced on a political plane in the 1850's. The restructuring of the party system which took place after 1854 reflected both the increasing sectional polarization and the new widening of ethnic-religious cleavages in the working class. Thus working class Protestant nativism contributed to the formation of the virulently anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant "American" or "Know-Nothing" Party which temporarily became one of the most successful third party movements in American history. By the middle of the decade the majority of the Know-Nothings fused with the Free Soil Party and a wing of the disintegrating Whig Party to form the new Republican Party. The rise of the Republicans clearly represented the triumph of the most aggressive Yankee small capitalist strata, and the party's program was a compelling synthesis of Protestant moralism, centralizing nationalism, and idealized entrepreneurial capitalism. Ironically, the Republican battle cry of "free labor" had nothing to do with the rights of collective labor, but rather evoked the dream of escape from wage labor through individual mobility.

The Catholic immigrants, in reaction, were driven into the Democratic party which offered a laissez-faire toleration of religious and cultural differences. *The ensuing political split in the working class endured until the eve of the New Deal, and its consequences were devastating for the development of class consciousness.* On one hand, native Protestant workers rallied to the leadership of their own bosses and exploiters, while the Catholic immigrants forged an unholy alliance with Southern reaction.

### (3) Racism: The Unifying Thread

Finally this account of the working class in the 1850's would be incomplete without discussing a third divisive force: racism. American democracy was, after all, the most spectacularly successful case of settler-colonialism, and the condition for "free soil, free labor" was the genocidal removal of the Indians. Moreover, as Tocqueville observed, the pre-Civil War North was—if anything—more poisonously anti-Black than the South. White racism, tied to the myth of a future black flooding of Northern labor markets, led most workers to oppose social equality and suffrage for black freedmen.

From Boston to Cincinnati, the white lower classes periodically rioted, attacked communities of freedmen, hounded abolitionists, and imposed color bars on their crafts. Northern blacks were everywhere excluded from the universalization of manhood suffrage in the 1820's and 1830's, and on the eve of the Civil War only four states in the Union allowed freedmen even a qualified franchise. Furthermore the rise of the Republican party and massive Northern opposition to the *extension* of slavery contributed little to changing these prejudices. The young Republican party openly opposed the integration of blacks into Northern society, or carefully skirted the issue. Deportation to Africa, in fact, was the favorite solution. Although segments of the native white working class, especially in New England, eventually embraced abolitionism, they remained a small minority whose opposition to slavery was more often framed within a religious ideology than within a clear political analysis of the relationship between capitalism and slavery. Unfortunately, more articulate and widely heard voices in the

working class were those of "labor leaders" and disgruntled Jacksonian radicals like Orestes Brownson or George H. Evans who, in the guise of class politics, advocated an alliance of Northern labor with the slaveowners against "capital."

Amongst the immigrant proletariat, on the other hand, a section of the German workers possessed a more or less revolutionary understanding of the political implications of the slavery crisis for the future of American labor. They attempted to mobilize support for abolitionism, and denounced the efforts of pro-slavery demagogues like Herman Kriege and the *New York Staats-Zeitung*. But these 'Red 48's'—including the vanguard "Communist Club" of New York—were isolated by language and their lack of understanding of the culture of American labor. Their heroic efforts had little impact upon the mainstream of the labor movement.

### The Good Citizens of Pennsylvania

As for the Irish (already the bulk of the unskilled working class), William Lloyd Garrison back in the 1840's had originated a bold strategy for building an alliance between Abolitionism and the contemporary movement in Ireland for repeal of the anti-Catholic laws. Unlike other Abolitionists, Garrison had a sincere sympathy for the Irish and believed that the immigrant supporters of Daniel O'Connell (leader of the repeal campaign) in America could be rallied to a mutually beneficial united front. In response to solicitations from Garrison, the "Great Liberator" (as O'Connell was popularly known) issued a series of ringing appeals for Irish solidarity with abolitionism: "I want no American aid if it comes across the Atlantic stained in Negro blood" or "Over the broad Atlantic I put forth my voice saying—Come out of such a land, you Irishmen, or if you remain, and dare countenance the system of slavery . . . we will recognize you as Irishmen no longer."

Immediately O'Connell received a torrent of angry replies from American Repealers decrying his support for blacks. One letter came from an assembly of Irish miners in Pennsylvania. After denouncing his address as a "fabrication" and warning that they would never accept blacks as "brethren," the miners added: *We do not form a distinct class of the community, but consider ourselves in every respect as citizens of this great and glorious republic—that we look upon every attempt to address us, otherwise than as citizens, upon the subject of the abolition of slavery, or any subject whatsoever, as base and iniquitous, no matter from what quarter it may proceed.*

This refusal of Irish miners in an anthracite hell-hole of eastern Pennsylvania not only to sympathize with the slaves, but to accept the implication—even from their own national hero—that they were in America anything less than "citizens," speaks volumes on the ideological impact of American "exceptionalism" and the difficulties of building a class conscious labor movement.

Thus, despite Garrison's and O'Connell's combined efforts, abolitionism failed utterly to stir the most exploited and outcast strata of the Northern working class. Although the Irish stood loyally by the Union in the Civil War (few as Republicans, most as "Union Democrats"), anti-black racism grew as the rising cost of living combined with a class biased conscription system further increased the miseries of the immigrant ghettos and fuel-



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ed the distorted perception that "the blacks were to blame." The great "Draft Riot of 1863"—the bloodiest civil disturbance in American history—exhibited the schizophrenic facets of the consciousness of the immigrant poor: their hatred of the silk-stocking rich and their equal resentment against blacks. Although attempts have been made to rationalize the sadistic attacks by the Irish on freedmen as the consequence of a desperate rivalry for unskilled jobs between the two groups, this analysis has lost ground in the face of growing evidence that blacks had already been excluded from most categories of manual labor and that the competitive "threat" was totally one-sided (e.g. against blacks). Perhaps the racism of the Irish must be seen instead as part and parcel of their rapid and defensive "Americanization" in a social context where each class sub-culture (e.g. native/Protestant versus immigrant/Catholic) faithfully reflected through the prism of its own particular values the unifying settler-colonial credo which made them all "citizens."

### B. Labor and Populism

The economic crisis at the beginning of the Civil War and the employer offensive which accompanied it undermined most of the remaining trade unions. But when a new unionism emerged at the end of the war, the basis for common action between native and immigrant had been strengthened by their shared experiences and sacrifices on the battlefield. Somewhere between 500,000 and 750,000 workers, almost a quarter of the male working class, fought for the Union; given the discriminatory draft system, a disproportionate share were Irish and German immigrants. Moreover in the industrial boom which began in 1863 and lasted until 1873, many immigrant workers began to move out of the unskilled job ghetto in which they had been previously confined and into the construction crafts, metal trades, and other skilled sectors. At the same time new winds of revolution from Ireland (the "1867 Fenian Revolution," the 1879-82 "Land War") and Germany (Lasallism and the struggle for suffrage) were politicizing numbers of immigrant workmen in a more radical direction. Violent echoes of pre-Civil War ethno-religious conflict were still heard after Appomattox (e.g. New York's "Orange Riots" of 1869 and 1870, the bloody feuding between the "Hibernians" and British miners in Pennsylvania coalfields, etc.). But the basic dynamic of the labor struggles of the post-Civil War generation was the growing unity of the working class at the workplace and its search for more effective forms of solidarity and trade union organization.

### The Strike Waves of the Late 19th Century

The Gilded Age was the beginning of an era of full-scale industrialization centered around the consolidation of a continental internal market and the growing mechanization of the capital goods sector of the economy. The expansion of Western agriculture and railroads created an enormous appetite for machinery and iron products which was fed by the rise of a vast new industrial complex around the Great Lakes. By the end of Reconstruction, Chicago had surpassed Manchester as the world's greatest manufacturing metropolis while the American working class had almost doubled in size. Yet mass production industries were still in their infancy and only a handful of factories employed more than a thousand workers.

The railroads were thus unique by virtue of their giant corporate size, financial resources, and enormous workforces. The railway working class, one million strong by the end of the century, and alone possessing the capacity for coordinated national strikes, emerged as a "social vanguard" of the entire American proletariat. It was no accident that the class struggles of each decade's business cycle (1870-1900) culminated in national railway strikes supported by the riotous solidarity of hundreds of thousands, even millions of other workers and sympathetic small farmers. The Great Rebellion of 1877, the massive Gould system strikes of 1885 and 1886, and finally the epic Pullman Strike (or "Debs Rebellion") of 1894: these were the lightning rods of class struggle in late nineteenth century America.

Each of these strike waves reinforced attempts to build more broadly inclusive national labor organizations as well as independent political formations. As early as 1867, with the formation of the shortlived National Labor Union, the concept of a united workers' federation *integrating both native and foreign-stock laborers* had begun to win mass support. During the 1877 railroad strikes, a previously clandestine and little-known movement—(patterned after free-masonry to shield it from employer repression)—called the "Knights of Labor," emerged to lead struggles in a number of states. In a period when even the most skilled craftsmen had great difficulty maintaining union organization in the face of employer hostility, it was widely accepted that only a vast, inclusive movement of the entire proletariat, such as the Knights of Labor, would provide a sufficiently powerful framework of solidarity and mutual aid to allow component unions to grow and survive.

### The Social Vision of the Knights

Beyond the mere economic organization of the toiling classes, however, the Knights aspired to a more profound vision. They nourished a network of associations which bound together workplace and community including Working-men's Club Rooms, cooperative stores and factories, labor newspapers, singing societies, social clubs, political organizations, and a workers' militia (!) But the invention that most clearly testified to the Knight's project of forging a *parallel working class society* was the Knights of Labor "Court." In his fundamental work on the Order's membership and internal organization, Garlock provides a description of this astonishing institution: "Each Local Assembly had its own court whose officers were elected by the membership, in which Knights settled differences without recourse to the civil courts. Members charged one another not only with such violations of obligation to the Order as scabbing or accepting substandard wages, but for such violations of domestic obligation as wife-beating and desertion, for such violations of standards of social conduct as public intoxication or the failure to pay boarding bills." The embryonic class culture represented by the Knights not only transcended a "pure and simple" trade unionism, but also provided the first alternative to dominant ethnic religious sub-cultures. It has been estimated that at one time or another 1000,000 to 200,000 individuals served as officers in Knights courts or local assemblies; any sampling of names reveals the landmark reconciliation of Irish, German, and native workers that the Order had achieved. The Knights also made the first serious effort to organize women workers, and made pioneering,



though faltering attempts at integrating black workers.

The reasons for the decline of the Knights have long been the subject of heated controversy amongst historians; but two stand out as obvious *and* recurrent contradictions in the young American labor movement.

The Knights power on the railroads, for example, was undermined by the defection of the Engineers whose brotherhood was bribed and pampered by railroad barons grown keenly aware of the unique power of this group of workers to shut down the entire economy. After 1885 the Engineers, under the right-wing suzerainty of Grandmaster Arthur, never again officially struck or came to the aid of fellow railroad workers. The desertion of the Engineers' Brotherhood presaged the growth within the labor movement of a countertrend toward a narrow and "aristocratic" conception of organization.

A second problem illuminated by the crisis of the Knights was the already prominent coopting role of the Democratic Party. David Montgomery, contrasting British and American conditions, has suggested that the "most effective deterrent" in this period to the maturation of class consciousness and the creation of a labor party was precisely "the ease with which American workingmen entered elected office." The cooptation of individual labor leaders was facilitated by the revolution in American city government which occurred in the 1880's as an aspirant middle-class of Irish—and occasionally German—extraction began to take municipal power from old "brahmin" elites. Beginning with the victories of Irish mayoral candidates in New York (1880) and Boston (1884), the new politics generalized a Tammany Hall model of political brokerage based on a captive Catholic working class vote. Local trade union leaders—especially in the Irish-dominated building trades—were often key links in cementing machine control and principal beneficiaries of political sinecures. The overall dynamic of the spoils system was to corrupt labor leadership, substitute paternalism for worker self-reliance, and, through the formation of ethnic patronage monopolies, keep the poorer strata of the working class permanently divided. Finally it is important to recognize that this tendency toward the assimilation of labor leadership by local political regimes preceded by almost a generation the precipitation of a significant trade union bureaucracy *per se* (this would only develop on a broad scale with the rise of full-time "walking delegates" and business agents after 1900).

### A New Alternative?

It was, in fact, the Great Depression of 1893-96—the worst collapse of the nineteenth century—which forced the issue of the labor movement's independent political identity and sounded the depths of its internal unity and cohesion. The fighting will and consciousness of a whole generation of labor militants, matured over the long cycle of struggles and movements since 1877, was brought to its supreme test in the series of violent battles which culminated in the American Railway Union's boycott of the Pullman Company in 1894. What was so remarkable about the Pullman Strike was not only its escalation into a national confrontation between hundreds of thousands of workers and the federal government—that had also occurred in 1877—but, rather, its unprecedented meeting up with massive upsurges of native agrarian radicalism and international labor politics.

The birth of the Farmers' Alliance in the late eighties, in a period of falling crop prices and rising rents, had signaled a radicalization of agrarian protest in the United States. The Alliance derived its energy from its roots in the poorer strata of the rural population. In the Southern cotton belt, slavery had been recast into the debt servitude of the sharecropping system. The Farmers' Alliance, by its unprecedented feat of uniting black and white tenants, had become a subversive force of revolutionary potential. Furthermore, in areas of the South and the Southwest, an active cooperation had long existed between trade unions, local assemblies of the Knights and the Alliance. (A frequently overlooked fact was the dynamism of Southern trade unionism in the late eighties: New Orleans, in particular, had a powerful interracial trade union movement which made it something of a labor citadel by 1890.)

After the dramatic entry of the Alliance into politics in 1892, as the Peoples' Party, grassroots pressure began to build for a national farmer-labor coalition similar to what already existed in the Southwest. Labor-populism seemed to offer the unifying strategic vision and breadth of alliance which had been missing in the ephemeral labor parties which had briefly flourished in New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee after the great railroad strike of 1877 and again in the aftermath of Haymarket and the 1885-86 strike wave. At the same time, labor-populism seemed the natural American counterpart to the new parties of labor which were emerging in Europe and Australia, and might be called trade union rather than socialist parties.

It was, therefore, not surprising that it was a coalition of socialists and industrial unionists (especially the fledgling United Mine Workers) who lobbied within the AFL for independent labor political action as a counterthrust to government strikebreaking. At the 1893 A.F.L. convention they succeeded in winning majority support for an eleven point political program copied from the platform of the British ILP, (including the famous "plank ten" which called for "collectivization of industry"). The convention forwarded the program to constituent unions for membership ratification.

Then, in the face first of government suppression of the 1894 coal strike, immediately followed by federal intervention against the Pullman strikers, the current of interest broadened into a mass movement. The embattled national miners' and railroad unions both endorsed the populists, while at a tumultuous conference in Springfield called by the Illinois Federation of Labor, a broad spectrum of unionists, insurgent farmers, and middle class radicals met to consider the formation of a state-wide Peoples' Party. Against the dramatic background of Deb's imprisonment and the crushing of the Pullman Strike, the delegates unified around a populist banner and on the basis of an amended version of the eleven-point ILP platform.

Samuel Gompers, on the other hand, was determined to defeat the socialist challenge within the AFL and to "restrict and terminate the alliance between organized labor and Populism." His allies included not only the more conservative craft unions, but also the right wing of the Populist party. By 1894 a more conservative and anti-labor bloc of wheat farmers from the Great Plains states was beginning to displace the leadership of the radical Southern and Southwestern Alliancemen. With the financial resources of the silver interests (the "American Bi-Metallic League") behind them, the Midwesterners hoped first to



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reduce the populist program to the single issue of free silver, and then to maneuver a fusion with the silverite wing of the Democratic party. Gompers' success at the 1894 Denver convention of the AFL in preventing adoption of the ILP program, despite evidence of its endorsement by a majority of the rank and file, was the final blow. The AFL's repudiation of the eleven points then provided a perfect excuse for moderate agrarians and corrupt "machine" unionists in Illinois to foment a split with the populist left-wing. Finally, after a bitterly contested battle between the more conservative Midwestern and more radical southern wings of the Populist party in July, 1896, the progressive Omaha Platform (with its several pro-labor planks) was scrapped for the sake of free silver quackery and fusion with the Democrats. The subsequent presidential election—which a year or two before had promised to be the dawn of a new era of farmer-labor political independence—demolished all third party hopes, and ushered in, instead, a generation of Republican-big business dominance over national politics.

### Real Sources of Defeat

The question remains however, how could Gompers' maneuvers succeed in derailing such a movement? Were there not other, more profound forces acting to disrupt the advance of labor-populism and to deflect the development of American labor from the path traced by British and Australian labor parties? There were indeed. Firstly, there was a great discrepancy between the radicalism of the veteran left trade union militants—the Debs, McBrides, Morgans, etc.—and the apparent apathy or indifference of the majority of the urban and still predominantly unorganized working class. Despite the fact that Chicago in the midst of the depression was frequently described by contemporary observers as a city "trembling on the brink of revolution," the labor-populists won only about 20% of the potential labor vote (e.g., 40,000 out of 230,000) at the height of their influence in 1894 in the wake of the Pullman strike.

Secondly, the fact that the left-moving workers were a minority in the populist-labor coalition (unlike England and Australia) made it easier for the middle-class small farmer base to abandon the party's pro-labor positions and pull the entire movement into the Democratic party.

Thirdly, the united rebellion of the Southern yeomen and farm tenants—the cutting edge of agrarian radicalism—was broken up by a violent attack of the regional ruling class which counterposed "Jim Crow" and redneck demagoguery to the Farmers' Alliance and interracial co-operation. The vicious combination of black disfranchisement, racial segregation, and lynch terror was installed in the nineties to suppress militant black tenants, keep them tied to the land, and to prevent their future collaboration with poor whites. At the same time, the defeat of the great New Orleans General Strike of 1892—the first general strike in American history—destroyed the vanguard of Southern labor and wrecked interracial unity between workers. Out of its ashes arose a stunted, Jim Crow white unionism on one hand, and a pariah black sub-proletariat on the other. These twin defeats of Southern tenants and workers were decisive in allowing merchant-planter reaction to block the development of a free labor market and to freeze the Southern economy for more than half a century in the disastrous mold of a servile cotton monoculture.

Fourthly, this Southern counter-revolution was paralleled in the North by a resurgence of nativism and ethno-

religious conflict within the industrial working class. In the bleak depression days of the mid-nineties, many native as well as "old" immigrant workers came to believe that the burgeoning immigration had created a grave competitive threat (symbolically 1896 was the first year that eastern and southern European immigration exceeded that from northwest Europe). Simultaneously the political successes of Irish Democrats in the elections of 1890 and 1892 renewed the militant anti-catholicism led by the "American Protective Association" (APA), a predominantly Scotch-Irish group which blamed the collapse on the "flood of immigrants unloosed on America by papal agents") and the 150,000 member "United American Mechanics." Fatally for the hopes of labor radicals, anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic prejudice rent the unity of even those industrial unions—the miners and the railroad workers—who were supposed to be the bed-rock of the new labor-populism: Protestants were warned to avoid all unions dominated by papists, to discard the strike as a useless device, and to place no confidence in free silver. This advice made so strong an impression that Eugene Debs, the militant labor leader, and Ignatious Donnelly, the fiery Populist, called the APA an instrument designed by the railroad magnates to disorganize labor unions. In fact, APA-ism did have a disruptive impact on unionism, and not only among railroad employees. In the coalfields of Pennsylvania and Illinois this internecine strife checked a UMW organizing drive; in many cases it tore existing locals apart.

The populist movement itself, of course, reproduced many nativist motifs—including a strong affinity for prohibitionism—and its cultural style was definitely evangelical and Protestant. This may partially explain why so many foreign-born working class voters in the Midwest spurned labor-populism in 1894 and voted for McKinley in 1896. (Another reason, of course, was justified working class antipathy to the cheap-money schemes of the Midwestern wheat farmers.)

Finally this renaissance of ethno-religious conflict was intimately connected to a far-reaching change in popular ideology. In face of the race terror in Dixie and the demands of U.S. expansionism in the Caribbean and Pacific, the old popular nationalism, was being remolded into a xenophobic creed of "Anglo-Saxon Americanism" based on the latest tenets of social darwinism and "scientific racism." The convergence of this ideological trend with the second major recomposition of the American working class (which the "new" immigration of Slavs, Italians and Jews was feeding) provides a context to understand the increasing rightward shift by the AFL after 1894 toward Jim Crow unions, immigration restriction, and craft exclusivism.

It was this same polarization within the working class which was to provide the ultimate test for the ability of Debsian Socialism to root itself in the American body politic.

### The Failure of Debsian Socialism The Splintered World of Labour

The new immigration, like the old, provided super-exploited gang labor for extractive industries, domestic service, and construction. It also provided the armies of machine operatives and semi-skilled laborers required by the dramatic growth, from 1898 onwards, of the



trustified mass-production industries. By 1914, when Henry Ford began to create his "brave new world" of assembly production at his Highland Park (Michigan) Model-T plant, the majority of this enlarged working class were foreign-born workers. More often than not they were politically disenfranchised and segregated—by poverty or deliberate discrimination—into slum areas apart from the native working class. The new pattern of ethnicity, religion and skill produced the hierarchy within the working class depicted below.

#### Internal Stratification of the American Working Class—circa 1912

Division of Labor	Ethno-Religious Subculture	Party Affiliation
	Native Stock Workers	Republican
Skilled Crafts/ AFL Unions	British/Canadian Protestants	
	"Old" Catholic Immigration: Irish/German	Democrat
Unskilled or Factory Operative	"New" Catholic: Polish/Italian/Slovak Hungarian/Quebecois, etc.	urban political machines
Unorganized (or IWW/Socialist-led Garment Unions/ Mineworkers)	Yiddish (also Finns and % of new German- speaking immigrants)	Large % Socialist

The origins of this hierarchy require some comment. In the first place it is important to challenge the common assertion that immigration *per se*—"hordes of peasants," unmeltable and culturally backward—made class unity impossible. The evidence against that view, to which we will return is overwhelming. The *conscious decision* to forge ethnic solidarity and organization in America was most often a survival strategy and defensive reaction to exclusion and victimization in the new country. In fact, the actual impact of immigration depended greatly upon the strength and inclusivity of *existing* class institutions. But where the Western European class struggles of the 1880s and 1890s had spun a web of integrating working class institutions (ranging from workmen's clubs, cooperatives, and "labor churches" to *casas del pueblo* and workers' educational societies), the U.S. labor movement of the late nineteenth century, as we have seen, failed to generate a working class "culture" that could overcome the ethno-religious alignments outside the workplace.

#### The Impact of the New Division of Labor

Meanwhile, inside the workplace itself, a profound reorganization of the division of labor was reinforcing the effects of the new immigration. The introduction of new mass-production technologies went hand in hand with a corporate assault on the power of skilled labor. This offensive began on a systematic scale with the Carnegie Company's defeat of the powerful Homestead lodges of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers in 1892. It continued for thirty years, until the defeat of the railway "systems federation" strike in 1922 established the supremacy of the open shop. It was only the rapid expansion of industry which partially balanced and softened this defeat.

As for the new immigrants, they were "frozen" into the ranks of the unskilled. Any hope for upward mobility was stunted within the plants themselves by a labor process which was increasingly organized on the basis of ethnically and linguistically segregated work-groups supervised by unsympathetic native craftsmen or foremen. The organization of the steel mills was especially notorious in this respect especially when the craft unions had been crushed between 1892 and 1901.

But there were two countertendencies to this dominant process, some unions and the socialist current among the immigrants.

Where unifying trade unions existed, as in the Pennsylvania coal fields, the industrially organized miners succeeded, after long struggles, in forging a multiethnic labor force into a militant membership.

And where there were no already existing unions, new unions were forged by the historically distinctive German and Jewish socialist immigrants. Although every nation sent its exiled radicals across the Atlantic, the predominant languages of Marxism in America have been German and Yiddish. The employer's blacklists and Bismark's antisocialist laws forced new generations of German socialists to follow the footsteps of the "red 48ers" who had emigrated to the United States after the 1848 revolution. In the late nineteenth century these revolutionary German workmen—from whose ranks came the Haymarket martyrs Spies, Engel, and Fischer—created their own extraordinary German-speaking cultural apparatus of gymnastic societies, rifle clubs, educational circles, and socialist beer-gardens. They also played the major role in building such important unions as the Brewers, Cigar Makers, and Bakers. For several generations they were the left wing of the labor movements in Chicago and St. Louis, but without question their greatest accomplishment was making Milwaukee the strongest citadel of socialism in America from 1910 to 1954.

The other great concentration of immigrant radicalism was the Lower East Side of New York where a million and a half Jewish and Italian immigrants were crammed into the most dense tenement district in the world. One of the unexpected aftereffects of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was to provide the Lower East Side with an exiled cadre of brilliant young labor Bundists and Jewish Social Democrats. In a remarkably few years they had organized a mass base of fifty thousand or so Yiddish-speaking socialist voters who crusaded for garment unionism and provided the backbone of left-wing opposition to Tammany Hall.

#### The Twin Souls of American Socialism

The aspiration of Debsian socialism was to unify and represent this divided and culturally multiform American proletariat. In the wake of the Panic of 1907 and the Supreme Court's draconian attacks on trade unionism (the Danbury Hatters' and the Buck's Stove and Range cases—the American equivalents of Taff Vale), there was a powerful surge of working-class votes toward the Socialist Party, despite Gompers's attempt to steer labor into a *de facto* alliance with the Democrats. Yet by the high point of 1912 the party was being torn apart by internal schisms and ideological divergences. The crisis of the party, of course, had many causes, but above all it



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reflected the contradictory dynamic of the class struggle in the Progressive era.

The years between 1909 and 1913 marked a watershed in the history of the international labor movement. In the United States, as well as in Britain, Germany, France and Russia, they saw the outbreak of violent "mass" strikes and the entry of new strata of unskilled workers into the class struggle. Beginning with the rebellion of immigrant steel workers in McKees Rock (Pennsylvania) and sweated New York garment workers (the Shirtwaist Strike) in 1909, the supposedly "unorganizable" immigrant proletariat erupted in militant upheaval. Supported by the Industrial Workers of the World and the Socialist organizers of the garment unions, the new workers launched strike after strike across a spectrum of mass-production industries from textile to auto. Simultaneously the AFL—already hard-pressed by the so-called "Employers' Mass Offensive" of 1903-08—had to fight bitter, rearguard battles against the degradation of their crafts by dilution, "Taylorism," and speed-up. The longest and most epic of these struggles was the spectacular forty-five month fight of the railway shop crafts against the introduction of scientific management on the Harriman lines in 1911-15.

### Labor's "Civil War"

Unlike the strike waves of the 1877-96 period, however, the mass strikes of the early twentieth century largely failed to unify native and immigrant workers. Failing a convergence between the defensive fights of skilled labor and the organizing campaigns amongst the new immigrants, the movements tended to assume divergent and all too frequently antagonistic postures. Indeed the split within the working class became so profound that some socialist writers regularly wrote of the "civil war" in labor's ranks while IWW organizers complained that the AFL unions were deliberately undermining and sabotaging the strikes of the immigrant proletariat.

This discord between the struggles of the craft unions and unorganized immigrants was carried into the Socialist Party in the form of a conflict between two mistaken tendencies—its reformist and syndicalist wings. The reformists, led by Victor Berger from his German Socialist bastion in Wisconsin, were committed to a program of gradualism and municipal socialism exemplified by the mild civic reform and sporadic criticism of Gompers' leadership of the AFL. *They possessed no strategy or visible commitment to the unionization of the unorganized, and were generally indistinguishable from the AFL mainstream in their support for racist immigration restrictions.* Berger, moreover, was a declared white supremacist.

In contrast, the socialist left wing, many of whom angrily withdrew from the party after Big Bill Hayward was purged in 1912, fell into the syndicate trap. They adopted an almost exclusively industrial perspective that focused on the allegedly immanent revolutionary potential of the immigrant and unorganized workers. They repudiated the AFL as a hopeless cause and concentrated their energies in building the One Big Union. Although these left-socialists played invaluable supporting roles in the wave of immigrant strikes in basic

industry, their syndicalism proved to be only a temporary tactical palliative for the needs of the unorganized factory working class. The IWW could exemplify fighting solidarity at the workplace but it had almost nothing to say about the political problems of slum communities caught up in complex dependencies upon the power of church and patronage. It is not surprising that none of the great strikes of this period, with the exception of the campaign of the New York garment unions, left either durable union organization or led to any local victories for socialist candidates.

### The Strategic Failure of the Socialist Party

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that neither of the two major tendencies of American socialism in 1912 offered a realistic strategy for uniting the working class or coordinating trade union strategy with socialist intervention in the urban political arena. The reformists had no plan for building industrial unionism, while the revolutionaries saw no point in attempting to influence skilled workers or in contesting Gompers' domination of the AFL. Similarly, neither the "sewer socialism" of the right (whose municipal program was often—as Walter Lippman pointed out—indistinguishable from progressivism) nor the apoliticism of the syndicalist left met the need for a socialist political solution to the urban crisis and the plight of the slum proletariat. At every level the strategic perspectives of American socialism remained contradictory, embryonic, and unsynthesized.

On an organizational plane, the party never really attempted to meld its different social components into an organic whole. In reality American socialism remained a series of ethnically and linguistically segmented socialisms. Thus the most important socialist electoral strongholds were ethnically homogeneous constituencies: Germans in Milwaukee, Scandinavians in Minneapolis, Jews in Manhattan, Pennsylvania Dutch in Reading. Furthermore the leadership of the party kept the separate language organizations of the smaller ethnic socialisms at a distance from one another and from the levers of power within the party: "The immigrant socialists were the Party's transmission belt to the new immigrant workers. But the Party never set this transmission belt in motion. Instead, partly motivated by nativism and racism and worried by their politics, it kept these immigrant socialists adrift, failing to integrate them."

Perhaps the gravest failing of the party, however, was its utter inability to penetrate the core of the industrial working class: the old and new Catholic immigrants. Compared to their dominating presence in the AFL, for example, Irish radicals—although they included such fiery organizers as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, William Z. Foster and James P. Cannon—were only a beleaguered handful. Of the several million Poles concentrated in the industrial heartland, perhaps two or three thousand at most were affiliated to the right-wing Polish Socialist Federation. Meanwhile *il Proletario* moaned that "in a city that numbers 650,000 Italians [New York] there are a couple of hundred socialists registered with the party." While some historians have simply claimed that the opposition of the Catholic Church precluded any mass radicalization of Irish, Polish, or Italian la-



borers, the reasons would seem more complex. Italian immigrants to Argentina, after all, were the builders of a very radical labor movement, while Polish immigrant miners in the Ruhr were quite accessible to revolutionary agitation. Perhaps that temporary sojourner in American socialism, James Connolly, was right when he argued against Daniel De Leon that anti-clerical, anti-papist propaganda in an American context would always be mistaken by Catholic immigrants as another species of nativism. Connolly may have had particularly in mind the *Appeal to Reason*, the spectacularly successful (750,000 subscribers!) socialist journal from the cornbelt, which declaimed virulently against both the Catholic Church and the new immigration. Another kind of argument has been made by Melvyn Dubofsky in his study of the failure of the Socialist Party to reach the New York Irish: he points out that the "Irish immigrant link to the Democratic machine, well established by the end of the nineteenth century, was at floodtide in the Progressive era when Boss Charles Murphy grafted modern social reforms onto the old wardheeling Tammany structure." The implication is that the Irish workers by virtue of their relatively privileged access to trade union organization and political patronage, were little tempted by the entreaties of a predominantly Jewish socialist movement which, if it ever came to power, might dismantle the traditional Hibernian job trust at city hall.

### **The Struggle for Industrial Unionism**

One of the minor tragedies of the Socialist Party was that its bitter factional battles contributed so little to the recognition or clarification of these underlying strategic contradictions. Violent polemical wars—imitative of contemporary feuds in European socialism—waged back and forth between "revisionists" and "maximalists" without ever touching the crucial questions of the class composition or the unintegrated practice of the party. Debs, almost alone at times, seemed to have a strong intuitive grasp of the fact that socialism could never hope to win the American working class politically unless the internal unity of the class could be grounded in some common direction of struggle. He hoped that the movement for industrial unionism could provide such a unifying practice—answering the needs of both craftsmen and operatives—and, for that reason, he came to reject the dual unionism espoused by the syndicalist left wing. In this spirit he issued a somewhat quixotic call in 1914 for the formation of an industrial union "center" based on an alliance of the Eastern (UMW) and Western (WFM) miners, which could lead organizational campaigns in the mass-production industries and establish an alternative pole to Gompersism. Although Debs's *Appeal* was ignored, its spirit was resurrected in 1917 when the Chicago Federation of Labor under the militant leadership of John Fitzpatrick and Edward Nockels decided to flaunt narrow craft shibboleths and to pool resources for a bold organizing drive in the stockyards. With William Z. Foster as chief organizer and abetted by the government's fear of wartime strikes, 100,000 packinghouse workers in Chicago and neighboring cities were unionized in a historic victory over the big packers in 1918. But the victory was short-lived.

### **1919: the Test of Steel**

The next year, with the faint-hearted and unreliable support of the AFL leadership, Foster and Fitzpatrick attempted to carry out the methods of the stockyard campaign to the steel valleys of Pennsylvania and the mill neighborhoods of South Chicago. The steel industry was the Maginot Line of the open shop in America, and it was universally recognized that its organization was the strategic key to the entire industrial working class. Although the House of Morgan had wiped out the last vestiges of craft unionism a decade before, Foster and Fitzpatrick found hope in the growing unrest of the immigrant steel-workers who labored seven days a week, twelve hours a day in the deadly mills for poverty wages. Despite the vacillating attitude of the skilled native workers and the complex problems of craft territoriality (no less than 24 AFL unions claimed jurisdictions in steel), several hundred thousand, primarily immigrant, steelworkers heeded Foster's strike call against the most powerful industrial monopoly in the world. The Slavs and Italians held firm for three months against the "cossack" terror of the state police and company guards, but in the end the strike was betrayed by the craft unions and undermined by the growing climate of anti-radical, anti-foreign hysteria in the country.

As one historian has put it, 1919 was the "turning point. . . which didn't turn." It was the failed test of native labor's ability to unite with the immigrant proletariat. The defeat of the steel-workers' organizing drive marked the end of the remarkable insurgency of Eastern and Southern European workers which had rocked industry since 1909. Faced with a tidal wave of nativist reaction, exemplified by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in midwestern industrial states, the "new" immigrants retreated into the sanctuaries of ethnic community until the Depression triggered a second, even more militant upsurge. As for the skilled workers, the 1919 defeat opened the way for a broad employers' offensive that rolled back the wartime gains of the AFL and established the open-shop "American Plan" upon the ruins of the once mighty mineworkers and railway shop unions.

For almost a decade the corporations were virtually free from the challenge of militant unionism. In the interlude of the "American Plan," employers accelerated the attack on worker "control" within the labor process, the new mass-production technologies advancing side by side with new forms of corporate management and work supervision. The totality of this transformation of the labor process—first "Taylorism," then "Fordism"—expanded capital's powers of domination over the work force. Already by the end of the First World War, the capitalist class in United States (especially in the advanced sectors of the "Second Technological Revolution": vehicles, electrical machinery, chemicals, and other consumer durables) was perhaps a generation ahead of its European competitors in the degree to which skilled labor had been subordinated and fragmented in the labor process. At the same time, however, the revolution in production and the postwar debacle of the AFL was weakening the material props of craft consciousness. The "Fordist" integration of mass production was setting the stage for the emergence of the CIO and a rebirth of industrial unionism.



The following three pieces were written in response to the article, "Women's Self-Organization: A Marxist Justification," by Johanna Brenner, which appeared in the first issue of *Against the Current*.

## Women's Self-Organization: Marxist Justification From a Long View<sup>1</sup>

by SUSAN CAHN

The essential thrust of Johanna Brenner's article, "Women's Self-Organization: A Marxist Justification," the necessity for women to organize separately from men, even within revolutionary parties, to overcome women's oppression, is well-taken. The justification, however, is not entirely well put. A much stronger case can be made through the correction of certain historical analyses and the granting of more weight to the ideological aspects of women's oppression. There are three fundamental weaknesses of Brenner's analysis: her lack of appreciation of the role of ideology as both based in material conditions and as reacting back to justify, explain and reinforce those conditions; the vagueness of her general chronological approach and actual misdating of certain historical phenomena; and her misunderstanding of the effects of the putting-out system on women's place within their homes and society.

The first problem, a lack of appreciation of the role of ideology, is reflected in her denigration of feminist theories which tie women's oppression to what she calls "some biologically given and unchanging human nature," i.e., men's greater physical strength (p. 24). At particular historical stages of development, this natural phenomenon does provide a genuine material base for patriarchal relations. Rather than deny the validity of such an explanation of patriarchy, the question must instead be raised: What allows for the continued hegemony of such notions when their material base has been eroded?

More specifically, Brenner attributes the oppression of women during the feudal period to the fact that "only men owned and inherited the land upon which the household produced its livelihood" (p. 26). In fact, one of the essential characteristics of the feudal mode of production is that *nobody* owned or had definitive rights of inheritance over land. Rights to farm land were based on ability to provide labor. The kind of labor demanded by a landlord from the peasant tenants was generally agricultural labor—labor of such a sort that differences in physical strength and endurance were significant.

Because men were stronger and more productive, they were more likely to provide the service demanded by the landlord, thereby establishing traditional male occupations and a tradition of male "public" employment. Also, because of this greater strength in a pre-industrial economy where most skilled activities required physical strength, i.e., smithing, tanning, soldiering,



<sup>1</sup> Johanna Brenner, "Women's Self-Organization: A Marxist Justification," in *Against the Current* 1:1. All future references to this article are noted simply by page number.



men were likely to be the family members designated to seek work for wages when the household was unable to sustain itself without cash supplements. Women and children were expected to provide the labor required to meet subsistence needs of the household through farming the leasehold themselves.

Far from women's submission to patriarchal authority being "a result" of men owning and inheriting the land (p. 26) in feudal England, it was the women of the peasantry who had the clearest and least challenged rights of inheritance. A widow traditionally received one third of the property of her husband. She was often given, as well, the opportunity to retain control of the remaining two thirds. The condition was her ability to provide the landlord with the same productive capacity her husband had. This could be done either by sending her children or by hiring from the increasing abundance of property-less persons.

The grounds on which women were held under the authority of men were not men's ownership of land but men's greater ability—through their physical strength—to acquire the amount of land necessary for subsistence and women's need—through their relative physical weakness—for protection from men and from the economic results of their weakness: their lack of marketable skills and lack of opportunity to lease initially (although able to carry on the lease of a husband's land).

It is worth noting that the distinctions in physical strength during this period of their material significance were increased through the differential provision of food. The female laborer, traditionally paid less in wages for the same job as a man, was also given less food, despite the greater caloric needs of pregnant women and nursing mothers. Additionally, the food provided to workers was frequently more abundant and protein-filled than that of the peasant household itself. The men ate more heartily than women and, through vigorous labor, developed their strength, all the while explaining and buttressing their civil superiority through the reinforcing of its material base.

Thus, "the rise of capitalism" did not deprive men of the material basis of patriarchal control by depriving them of ownership of land. In fact, the effect of the expulsion from the land was the creation of a class of property-less men and women who had to sell their labor power to survive. Once again, the interaction of material conditions with the already present patriarchal ideology explains why men, ultimately, fared more successfully in the struggle for employment than did women. It was, first of all, men who were rendered technologically and visibly unemployed in the early years of capitalism: one shepherd replacing five harvesters; the establishment of national peace, making redundant the employment of vast numbers of peasants in armies; the closing of monasteries releasing large numbers of regular and secular monks with no skills and no homes.

The traditional wage labor of women—maid service—was still a possible option for large numbers of women in the early years of capitalism, although its traditionally low wages became relatively even lower and demand for unskilled maidservants diminished. In the early years of capitalism, the perceived threat to social order and the stable establishment of capitalist property relations was, unquestionably, that of "mas-

terless men." In the eyes of the rising capitalist, the "naturally" greater propensity of men for aggression gave men the unquestioned advantage over women in the struggle for wage positions. Not only were men likely to be more productive, but they were also more likely to need the discipline of service.

Yet, it was on the role of women as productive workers that the effects of eviction were, in fact, most felt. This is because the traditional role of men was already established as one outside the family, while the role of the woman was to fill the basic subsistence needs of the family through her own productive efforts, "of her own," without the mediation of cash or the market. With their eviction from the land, women were rendered incapable of fulfilling their traditional roles. To meet their subsistence needs, they too had to find wage work. In this, they were already at a considerable material disadvantage compared to men.

The actuality of this is clearly evinced in the "putting out" system of early capitalism under which raw or semi-processed material was delivered to the home to be worked on. Contrary to Brenner's assertions (p. 26), this system was a disaster for women. The "access to income independent of men," praised by Brenner, is a "liberating" phenomena for women only under particular conditions. The historical conditions of the rise of capitalism in England were such that the effects of this access were both confining and debasing to women.

In the first place, in the English peasant household of the 15th and 16th centuries, before the "putting out system" of early capitalism took hold, women already had access to an income independent of men. The responsibility for the dairy and the poultry was the woman's and any income generated thereby was acknowledged to be hers. In the second place, and this is even more significant, any income generated thereby was hers to do with as *she* saw fit. In practice, this income was generally added to the income provided by the male working for wages and was considered part of her contribution to the household or domestic economy. However, as such, it remained under *her* control, for the woman's right to disperse funds to meet the needs of the household was recognized to be a necessary adjunct to the division of labor within the family. Women were widely acknowledged to be the experts—appropriate managers of household finances on both *natural* and social grounds—on *natural* grounds because women were weaker than men, they were necessarily more cautious and, therefore, more thrifty; and on *social* grounds because women remained at home more than did men and were more familiar with both the household needs and how best they could be met by the particular family unit. Not, of course, that they had much to manage: the object of the household unit was subsistence, not accumulation, and the woman was expected to be able to achieve that goal through her labor with a minimal amount of cash.

Thus, in the third place, the necessity itself for this income independent of men was an index of the women's inability to fulfill her traditional role. Deprived of her own property and, often, even of common rights of grazing, the evicted woman of the peasantry was unable to fulfill her traditional role in the traditional way. Her attempts to meet her traditional obligations through labor in the putting-out system accelerated



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and reinforced the changing relations of power within the family.

The male, now constantly present within the household, with the vocal encouragement of ideologues, assumed full control over household finances. Within the peasant household, the early years of capitalism brought relatively greater economic inequality between husband and wife. The monetary contribution of the husband was, by far, the greater and it was by means of exchange, through the money largely provided by the husband, that more and more household needs were met. The smaller income generated by the wife was only to a lesser and lesser extent supplemented by her provision of necessary products.

The example cited by Brenner of the household as a producing textile unit provides clear evidence about the derogatory effects of the putting-out system. She characterizes the husband as weaver and wife as spinner. Such a characterization accurately described the social division of labor: weaving was almost exclusively a male occupation by 1500 and spinning was "from time immemorial" the occupation of women. The characterization leaves out two salient features of this division of labor, however. Weaving was remunerated at far higher levels than spinning and was the object of more esteem, as an occupation requiring some degree of acquired skill, while spinning was done by all women and most children. That weaving itself was not a highly regarded nor highly paid craft underlines how debased an occupation was spinning. Moreover, the combined product of the work of eight spinners was matched by the product of one weaver. In other words, with the rise of capitalism and the putting-out system, as the qualitative differences of the social division of labour were wiped out and the contributions of husband and wife to the household could be assessed by a single standard, the value of the wife's contribution was one-eighth that of her husband's.

**I**t was during these early years of capitalism, in the 17th century, long before the development of industrial capitalism, that what Brenner calls "the whole complex of modern sexual roles" (p. 28) was being articulated and refined. Among the capitalist classes, indeed, ideologues cited the potential of women as creators of havens from heartless (in the 17th century, read godless) worlds in their assignment of the household and nurturant tasks rather than those productive of exchange value to women of their own strata. Among the peasantry, the question of household work was resolved with less ideological interference. It was, obviously, the less valuable labor which could and should be the more frequently interrupted to attend to the needs of children or other household members. When the low remuneration received by women's work is added to the nature of that work itself, i.e., easily interrupted and easily recommended, the material rationale for it being the spinner who interrupted her work to perform domestic tasks is clear and has nothing to do with women's fertility.

What, however, is not so clear from this exposition is why this social division of labor should have been perpetuated within the family during this period of domestic production. The bare description of the material facts does not explain why women remained spinners and men remained weavers, why the economic depen-

dence of women on men should have been reinforced and patriarchal authority made more pervasive and effective. Herein the role of ideology must be considered. Men remained weavers because they *had been* weavers. Opening up the trade to women threatened to deprive men of jobs and employers. Male weavers in their numerous actions to prevent women from entering weaving claimed women were not physically strong enough to operate looms without help. True. But neither were men. Until the invention of the power loom, it took two workers to operate a loom. The assistance of a woman was as effective as that of a man. But both the employers and peasant-working men sought, and succeeded, in excluding women from practice of the trade.

It was in this context that the notion of the family wage was developed and won by peasantmen. By 1650, wage rates reflected a distinction between married and unmarried men. It was a victory with more significance for family relations than for class struggle. The battle was waged by men not that they might benefit from the "services" of wives (p. 28) but rather that they might benefit from the exclusion of women from competition for jobs, that they might limit the number of producers. Its acceptance symbolized and reinforced a shift in household roles: the husband was now the provider of family needs, while it was the wife who supplemented his provisions. As he was the basic provider, so he controlled the money which went to meet household needs.

The acceptance of a family wage by the capitalist class was quick. The notion that women were dependent on men for subsistence was, of course, useful to bourgeois men in establishing "order" within their homes. But, also, the social context of the time must be considered. The family wage was set as normative during a time period when it was *not expected* to provide for the subsistence needs of the family at all. In the 17th century, the ideology that men provided for their families through their labor and women nurtured their families became dominant. It was acknowledged that the wages of laborers were insufficient to maintain families. But their wages were supplemented through the social ethos in the 17th century that families and laborers were maintained by their parishes. Employers paid what they called a family wage and the community as a whole took up the slack, guaranteeing that subsistence needs would be met. Thus, the employers were enabled to provide men with masters, without being required, as employers, to pay out a true family wage, while peasant men and wage laborers succeeded in reinforcing their right to more opportunities, more power and a greater share of the social product than women.

Again, during these early years of capitalism and the 17th century predominance of the putting-out system, the vulnerability of women to pregnancy posed no obstacles to women being the family member who generated the family wage. It was not the likelihood of their becoming or being pregnant which prevented them from obtaining outside labor or better paid skills. It was the better organization of men and the *already established* tradition of male public employment—a tradition established on material grounds of differential strength, the significance of which had already disappeared.



In fact, it was during these years when both husband and wife worked within the family unit that the modern role of mother was created—the role which *later* was used to justify women's subordination to men. During the centuries when the woman's labor was valued as highly as the man's, her fertility was not a hindrance to that labor. Infants were sent away to wet nurse and, at their return, were put to work in the family industry. They were sent out to work for other masters at a young age. Those children too young to be useful were swaddled: that is, they were bound in restrictive clothing and put aside, out of danger but not within disturbing earshot, while adults performed their labor.

During the 17th century, however, the raising and socializing of children was shifted from a social, public task to a private one. Breastfeeding was held up as normative and accepted by women who had no other means of making productive contributions to their households. While, on the one hand, ideologues praised the nurturant mother, on the other, they denigrated the tasks of maternity, relative to those both of paternity and of the male head of household. That is, they held up as ideal a condition in which women did not "have to work"—a condition the middle class achieved and the peasantry strove for—but they also scorned the woman who did no productive labor. They defined the tasks of maternity in biological terms and assigned child care and housework to women explicitly on the grounds that men had more important and interesting things with which to concern themselves. Defining domestic tasks as drudgery and servile in kind, men assigned them to women because women had no more valuable tasks to perform. As women's responsibility for these tasks became customary, an accepted part of life, then "nature," in the form of women's biological reproductivity, was adduced as justification for the household division of labor. By then, material tasks themselves had been made private and burdensome to other employment: by then, their assignment to women was as self-evidently natural and necessary as was the social division of labor itself.

The significance of all this for women's self-organization lies in both the means men used to reinforce their civil superiority and the effects of women's relegation to the domestic sphere. Men achieved the exclusion of women from occupations and public life where men were organized collectively. They achieved the subordination of individual women by isolating those women, and denying them collective existence, support, and reinforcement of self-worth. Women will be able to end their individual oppression only through their own collective struggle, through a collective affirmation of self-worth and the rediscovery of the abilities of leadership and organization trained out of them.

For revolutionary organizations, the example of the family wage is usefully illustrative of the different interests men and women can and do have. Many male revolutionaries are unyielding and conscious in their resolve to give women freedom from oppression. As the working class cannot be *given* socialism but must

struggle for it, so the rights of women will be firmly founded only insofar as women are organized and vigilant in their defense of them.

Awareness of the importance of ideology in creating modern sex roles means revolutionaries must not deride, underestimate or ignore the ideology of the new right. As the ideological content of the new right has lost its correspondence with material reality, so had the ideological content of 16th and 17th century men. Yet, that ideology served as the base on which modern sex roles were founded and maintained until such relations themselves provided those questioning them with more contemporary ideological justification. The ideology which has for so long defined women as passive and incapable of leadership and self-support can be overcome only through its evident inability to describe or explain reality accurately. Men cannot demonstrate women's potential. Only women collectively struggling can do so. Organized within revolutionary socialist parties, they can also be a significant part of the struggle to overturn the relations of capitalism which perpetuate the exploitation of both men and women, relations which, as Brenner notes, provide men with material incentives to oppress women.

This essay shows that, although the struggle to end women's oppression cannot be won without ending the material grounds for it in capitalist social-productive relations, neither will the overturning of capitalism automatically lead to the overturning of oppressive gender relations. Although its material base had been eroded, patriarchy as a set of gender relations emerged stronger from the transition of feudalism into capitalism—in a changed form, to be sure, but one which perpetuated unequal relations and which was able to provide for its reproduction in changed circumstances. Only through the organization of women themselves can such a phenomenon be prevented in the transition from capitalism to socialism.



I express my thanks to Stephen Downs for his encouragement, constructive criticism and generous sharing of ideas. The views expressed herein, however, are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of Stephen.



# LETTERS

## UP FROM JUSTIFICATION

A letter by Jean Crossman: in reply to Johanna Brenner's *Women's Self-Organization: A Marxist Justification*.

To say the least, I was disappointed in Johanna Brenner's article in the first issue of *Against the Current*. Her "justification" for autonomous organization of women turned out to be virtually a repetition of the old catechism that what's good for the proletariat is, by and large, good for women. A thorough Marxist feminist analysis will show that it is unnecessary to "justify" the autonomous organization of women. Feminists, unlike most Marxists, have long recognized that patriarchy—that form of social organization in which women are controlled, dominated, limited, restrained or otherwise shaped by men—is a social organization which can be seen as far back as anthropological data can take us, beginning with the capture and exchange of women noted even by Engels himself in primitive societies. While Brenner accuses feminist theory of failing to recognize the ways in which various modes of production have shaped and determined patriarchy, she herself fails completely to recognize that the system of patriarchy has been a critical element in the shaping and determining of all modes of production, from feudalism through socialism. Her analysis denies both the independent origins of the system of patriarchy and its historical continuity and relative autonomy with respect to any given mode of production (class society). Her argument, then, finally dissolves into economic determinism and once again makes the struggle of women against patriarchy co-terminus with the struggle of the working class against capital.

Brenner wants to argue that it is a mistake to see the working class family as a locus of the oppression of women under capitalism. She is right to want to take a more critical and nuanced look at this institution. In beginning to explore the contradictory nature of the working class family, her argument raises important questions for understanding both contradictions within the family (for women, children and men), as well as between the family and other entities and institutions within society. Unfortunately, however, in making this argument, Brenner constructs a kind of determinism which severely obfuscates the realities of the history of women's oppression. Brenner posits that the material basis for the patriarchal oppression of women lay within the feudal system in male-only property rights. She fails to see that such a system of property ownership was a *symptom*, an aspect of the particular shape of patriarchy under feudalism. Because of her inability to see the historical continuity of patriarchy before and since feudalism, Brenner is led to assert that not only was the material basis for patriarchy virtually overturned by capitalism, but in fact women were "in the abstract" equal to men, for "after all, they were equally wage earners" (p. 27) Just like the working class is "abstractly" free within the marketplace of capital? "Abstract" equality does not exist, but indicates that we had better take a more careful look behind the scenes to see why in fact reality belies the theory.

From abstract equality, Brenner moves to discover the material basis *within the capitalist system itself* for the recreation of a new oppression of women. She finds this in women's biological role in reproduction and the low level of the development of technology around birth control. So these *biological and technological* factors led to new forms in which, unfortunately but understandably, the working class itself reinvented the oppression of women through isolating us within the home and barring us from effective participation as wage laborers. Of course Brenner acknowledges the existence of hangovers of patriarchal habits of thought which contribute to some measure towards this outcome of the working class' struggle against capital. But what primarily emerges is that women were oppressed through a lack of technology to overcome our biology.

Today Brenner sees that the technological problems have been nearly overcome. What keeps us down today is the system that has developed which puts us in charge of raising the children. So until we have good quality childcare, we will by and large continue to be stuck at home. And since we are unlikely to get massive social investment in good quality childcare short of socialist revolution, it becomes clear why we women should hitch our wagon to the star of a united struggle with the men of the working class for socialist revolution. I am still unclear in

this overall argument why it is that Marxists must support the autonomous organization of women. I think it is because men do end up benefiting from the oppression of women and they can not be expected to lead our struggles. But what is of most importance is that since "capitalism creates the conditions for women's oppression" (p. 32), the struggle to liberate women is the same as a struggle for socialism.

What concerns me most in Brenner's article is its near total misunderstanding or perhaps even dismissal of patriarchy as a concrete and active social force. The wealth of anthropological data which exists today showing the oppression of women as an element in social organization *prior* to the emergence of class society must at least make us question the traditional Marxist analysis. In order to adequately theorize the true locus of the oppression of women we must first recognize its true history. I agree with Brenner that an analysis which finds women's oppression growing out of men's human nature or some such is strategically barren and in effect dooms us forever to our oppression. But neither can we ignore or deny that there has existed since the beginnings of human society and culture a social and ideological structure which has subsumed women to the rule of men. To ignore this fact makes it equally impossible to analyze the real nature of women's struggle and particularly to understand that the struggle by women against patriarchy, our struggle to overthrow all forms of domination by men, *is not always in harmony with the struggle of the working class (women and men) for the overthrow of capital.*<sup>1</sup>

Once we recognize that patriarchy is a beast much like the cockroach in its adaptability and survival techniques, we can go about developing a strategy for its extermination on a whole new level. As Marxists we must accept the complexity and interpenetrating mutual determination of social organization. We must recognize that patriarchy as ideology and social organization itself has acted upon and shaped the various modes of production just as it has itself been bent and molded to fit the feudal peasant system, the working class family, and even the demands of transitional and socialist economies as well. But however it looks, whatever its shape, whether we wear the veil or hot pants, whether we are asked to serve tea or to serve the revolution, we are confronting something which is NOT reducible to the mode of production under which it functions.

It is unquestionably true that our biological role in the reproduction of the species played a crucial role in our oppression. But it is patriarchy itself which has accounted for that biology becoming a limitation. The biological moment was long ago superseded and transformed, being reproduced both socially and psychically to such an extent that we can no longer see biology asserting itself in an independent unconsciously determining way. Capitalism did not re-invent the oppression of women because it hadn't solved the technical problems of birth control. It is not our biology which oppresses us, but our social organization.

As Marxists and as feminists we need not "justify" autonomous organization by women. Once we recognize patriarchy as the unique form of social organization which characterizes *all* distinctively human culture, we recognize that the struggle of women to overthrow patriarchy is in fact distinct from the struggle of the working class to overthrow capital and to establish themselves as the new ruling class. Equipped with this fundamental history of the oppression of women, we can begin to articulate both the intersections and, perhaps even more importantly, the divergences between our struggle as women against patriarchy and our struggle as Marxists against capital. As feminists we must elaborate a revolutionary theory of the laws of patriarchy and a revolutionary practice against it. And as Marxists we must face the issue of being at odds with ourselves more often than we might wish in our concurrent struggles against the rule of capital and the rule of men.

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A letter by Beth Bush of New York City.

As an active feminist who has operated within a Marxist framework for many years, I would like to share my reactions to Johanna Brenner's article. Like many feminists, I experience a conflict in being drawn to Marxist theory. On the one hand, it is a theory of social change based on human struggles to meet their basic needs. At the same time I am put off by the, at

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<sup>1</sup>Juliet Mitchell presents an extremely provocative argument for the material basis of patriarchy in her book *PSYCHOANALYSIS AND FEMINISM* (Vintage, 1974). I would suggest this as an excellent place for Marxist feminists to begin developing the kind of theory and analysis that we need.



best, sketchy treatment of women in Marxist economic and social analyses. We remain in an unsatisfying life situation so mysterious to us that we hardly know what to do about it. We know by now that the nub of that situation resides in our responsibilities for child care.

There can be no denying that the "traditional" left strategy for political action (starting with Marx and Engels) has focused on the recruitment of males. I think the explanation for that is linked to interpretations of Marxist theory which target the workplace (the focal point of economic exploitation and potential power) as the most promising and significant locus for developing opposition to the capitalist system. Brenner discusses two theories which attempt to account for women's marginal position at the workplace, as the result of a historical struggle for the "family wage," which was resolved by restricting women's access to jobs.

I liked Brenner's perspective on the historical struggle for the "family wage"—that women were not passive objects and victims of its resolution in favor of men, but rather, that working class women, confronted with the urgent problem of how to save their own lives and those of their children, themselves actively worked for the male "family wage" as the best solution they thought possible. They gained survival, but through a solution that established the basis for the sex-stereotyped labor-market segmentation which capitalism exploits so profitably today. The exploitation of young South American and Asian women by the microcomputer industry today looks very much like the situation of young women in the textile towns of New England at the beginning of this century. The capitalist system is again using women's marginal relationship to the workforce to aid in expansive capital accumulation.

Of course, the struggle for the "family wage" was not settled once and for all. The current women's movement has raised and intensified it once again. The current campaigns for equal access to good-paying jobs, the demand for "job equity" (re-evaluation of skill levels employers actually demand of women in their low-paying jobs), the protests against sexual harassment (long a weapon to keep women out of skilled jobs monopolized by males), the demands for group child care, and the growing demand that fathers share in the basic nurturing of young children—all are struggles by women to gain economic independence.

It is true that the success of these demands would eat into profits, and the struggle for them encounters massive resistance from protectors of profits. J.P. Stevens, Sanderson Farms, and Essex Wire, as a few examples, put up vicious fights in the face of women's struggles for economic independence. On the other hand, huge amounts of money are spent to "educate" us about how to be good mothers and mates (even though working outside of the home) by buying the right products—McCall's year-old magazine *Working Mother* is a fine example.

We do require strong, autonomous women's groups to develop a focus and support struggles around these issues, because of the resistance not only of employers, but of the men with whom we live, work and struggle. Even so, it doesn't seem to me that a

theory involving a patriarchal overlay to the capitalist system, which sees bourgeois and working class men united in the oppression of women, is necessary to explain the resistances we encounter from mates, co-workers and comrades, and it can be misleading to us in developing effective strategies for struggle.

We don't need a theory of patriarchy to help us see that the changes we need to make in the structure of the family as well as the work force may frighten men—almost certainly will make them uncomfortable. We need women's groups to develop issues and campaigns that we feel confident about, so that we can enlist the aid of male allies for whom an adjustment to our issues is not easy.

Take, as an instance, the issue of sexual harassment at the moment at the workplace. Bantering about women as sex objects has served as conversational currency (along with sports) at traditionally male work sites for a long time. One of the first battles women who gain access to those jobs have to engage in—for their own survival—is to stop that old conversational gambit. It is truly upsetting to men and makes them very angry. I can't see how subscribing to a patriarchal theory would help me in that situation; according to it, I think my frame of reference would have to be armed warfare. It probably wouldn't occur to me that any of the men in the situation might be willing to help; I wouldn't check that out; I would lose. This isn't just a theoretical situation; I wouldn't say *hundreds*, but *enough* women to support such a conclusion have found that, with support from each other and from male allies whom they have won by persuasion, they have been able to change a situation which made their workplace unendurable to them.

We will have to do the same thing to change the existing arrangements for the nurturing of children. As Brenner states, it is the primary rationale used as justification for women's position in the workforce, in which we see our salaries pegged at 59 percent of males' salaries for full-time work.

Of course the answer is to develop socially organized child care, and to insist that men share in this responsibility. But our particular relation to childrearing is an issue of confusion in our own minds at present; we accept debilitating myths on this issue in a fashion similar to the 19th century myths around women's physical inferiority. We are not sure *ourselves* that sharing responsibility for children in a *social* way will really be beneficial, or will provide adequately for children's growth and our needs for intimate, trusting and special relationships. That is what women need to develop together, so that they can join confidently in struggle for the changes from which they will benefit.

Brenner states that it will be a tough struggle, even an impossible struggle, to win *totally* without a socialist transformation of society. That might sound like a brush-off of the need for women to undertake that struggle now, dragging males along with them; it might sound like an old "wait until after the revolution" position.

I would like to suggest one short addition to Brenner's perspective. I would say that not only is the focusing of women on the problem of rearranging childcare a necessary direction for the effective continuation of struggle for women's liberation; it is a necessary part of the struggle for a socialist revolution.

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